

The Ulster Cycle: The Wooing of Emer and other stories

by Patrick Brown

The fullest version of *The Wooing of Emer* is found in the Book of Leinster (c.1160) in a text dating from the tenth or eleventh century. An earlier, fragmentary version is found in several manuscripts, including *Lebor na hUidre* (the Book of the Dun Cow, c.1106). This retelling is based on both versions.

Cú Chulainn's Shield is an anecdote found in the manuscript H.3.17. This is my own translation, with thanks to Breandán Dalton, Dennis King, and especially David Stifter for their help and suggestions.

The Death of Aife's Only Son is found in the Yellow Book of Lecan, compiled about 1390, but the language of the story dates from the ninth or tenth century.

The Death of Derbforgaill is found in the Book of Leinster.

The Elopement of Emer comes from the late 14th Century Stowe MS No 992.

The Training of Cú Chulainn is a late, alternative version of Cú Chulainn's travels and training. It is found in no less than eleven different manuscripts, the earliest being Egerton 106, dated to 1715.

The Wooing of Emer

A great and famous king, Conchobor son of Fachtna Fathach, once ruled in Emain Macha, and his reign was one of peace and prosperity and abundance and order. His house, the Red Branch, built in the likeness of the Tech Midchuarta in Tara, was very impressive, with nine compartments from the fire to the wall, separated by thirty-foot-high bronze partitions. It had a wooden floor and a tiled roof, and inside there were carvings of red yew. Conchobor's own compartment was in the front of the house, and had a silver ceiling, supported by bronze pillars with golden headpieces inlaid with carbuncles. The light from these glittering fittings meant that inside the house, night was as bright as day.

Hanging from the roof was a silver gong. Whenever Conchobor hit the gong with his royal rod, all the men of Ulster fell silent.

There were stalls for twelve chariot-chiefs around the king's compartment. All the bravest warriors were welcome inside at times of feasting, and none would crowd the other. Lavish gatherings were held there of all the splendid warriors of Ulster: games were played, songs were sung, and feats performed.

Once, the men of Ulster were there in Emain Macha, drinking from Conchobor's great vat, the *Iern-Gual*, 'Iron Chasm' or 'Iron Coal'. It could satisfy all the Ulstermen at one sitting, and it would be filled a hundred times every evening. The chariot-chiefs – including: Conall Cernach, son of Amergin; Fergus mac Róich, bravest of the brave; Lóegaire Búadach, son of Connad; Celtchar, son of Uthechar; Dubthach, son of Lugaid; Cú Chulainn, son of Súaltam; and Scél, son of Barnene, who was the warder of Emain Macha and a great storyteller – 'a story of Scél's' is proverbial – performed their feats on ropes stretched from door to door. They performed the spear feat, the apple feat and the feat of the sword-edge, and Cú Chulainn outdid them all at feats of skill and speed.

The women of Ulster loved Cú Chulainn for these skills, as well as his looks and the sweetness of his speech. In his kingly eyes were seven bright jewels – four in one eye, three in the other. He had seven fingers on each hand, and seven toes on each foot. He had the gift of prudence (until his warrior's flame came upon him),

the gift of feats, the gifts of *buanfach* and *fidchell*,¹ the gifts of calculating, prophesy, discernment, and beauty. He had only three faults - that he was too young (his beard had not yet grown, and the other youths gave him a bit of stick about that), too daring, and too beautiful.

The men of Ulster got together to discuss Cú Chulainn, for all their wives and daughters loved him. He didn't have a wife of his own, so they decided to find a maiden whom he would be happy to woo. They figured that a married man would be less likely to ruin their daughters or steal the love of their wives. Besides, they were worried he might die young and leave no son to inherit his unique talents.

Conchobor sent nine men into each province of Ireland, into every city and every stronghold, to find the daughter of a king, a chief or a hostel-keeper who might please Cú Chulainn, but a year later, they returned empty handed. So Cú Chulainn went to woo a maiden he knew in Luglocha Logo, called Emer, daughter of Forgall Monach - the Wily.

He set off in his chariot, driven by Láeg mac Riangaibra. It was so fast that none of the horses or chariots of Ulster could catch it. He found on her playing-field, with her foster-sisters, daughters of the landowners who lived around Forgall's stronghold. They were all learning needlework and fine crafts from Emer. Of all the women of Ireland, Cú Chulainn had chosen to woo Emer because she had the six gifts: beauty, voice, sweet speech, needlework, wisdom and chastity. He said that would only be interested in a maiden who was his equal in age and form and breeding, and with skill and dexterity, and as Emer possessed all those qualities, and was the best handiworker in Ireland, she was the girl for him.

Cú Chulainn had put on his finest clothes, and went to her to show off his beauty. The maidens, sitting on a bench at the gate of the stronghold, heard the clatter of the horses' hooves, the creaking of the chariot, the cracking of the straps, the grating of the wheels, the rush of the hero, and the clanking of weapons, coming towards them.

'Someone look out,' said Emer, 'and tell us who's coming.'

Fial, Emer's sister, said, 'I see two horses, spirited and strong, equal in size and beauty, fierceness and speed, running side by side,

¹ Two board-games.

their long manes and tails flowing behind them. On the right side of the chariot-shaft, a grey horse, muscular, fierce, swift and wild; on the left, a black horse, spirited and fiery, whose long, curly mane hangs down over his forehead. The beating of their hard hooves turns the solid ground to flame.

‘Behind them, a chariot of fine wood and wickerwork travelling on white-bronze wheels. The shaft is of bright silver, mounted on white-bronze, and the yoke is of gold.

‘It’s driven by a tall, slender freckled man. His hair is bright red and curly, and it’s held out of his eyes with a bronze circlet, and tied back with a golden clasp. He wears a tunic with sleeves to his elbows, and he drives the horses with a red-gold goad.

‘In the chariot is a dark, sad man, the most beautiful in Ireland. He wears a crimson, five-folded cloak, fastened on his white chest with a brooch of inlaid gold, and a white, hooded shirt. Seven red dragon-gems in each of his eyes; blue-white sparks flashing from his blood-red cheeks; a shower of pearls in his mouth; eyebrows as black as charcoal. His eyes burn with a look of love.

‘A golden-hilted sword rests on his thighs, and a blood-red spear with a formidable blade is fastened to the copper frame of the chariot. On his shoulder, a crimson shield with a rim of silver, ornamented with golden animal designs.

‘He leaps the hero’s salmon leap, and performs many other amazing feats. This is no ordinary chariot-chief.’ Cú Chulainn arrived at where the maidens were sitting, and wished a blessing on them. Emer lifted her beautiful face to him, and said, ‘May God make smooth the path before you.’

‘May you be safe from all harm,’ he replied.

‘Where have you come from?’ said Emer.

‘Not hard to tell,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘From the cover of the sea, over the great secret of the Túatha Dé Danann,² and the foam of the two steeds of Emain Macha; over the Morrígan’s³ garden, and the great sow’s back; over the glen of the great dam, between the god

² Tuatha Dé Danann: the Peoples of the Goddess Danu, the race of gods who inhabited Ireland before the coming of the Gaels, who now live underground in the *síd* mounds.

³ The Morrígan: the ‘Great Queen’ or ‘Terror Queen’, one of the more or less interchangeable Irish furies or war goddesses. Also known as the Badb or the Nemain.

and his prophet; over the marrow of the seeress, between the boar and his dam; over the washing-place of the horses of Dea; between the king of Ana and his servant, to Monnchuile of the four corners of the world; over the great crime and the remnants of the great feast; between the great vat and the little vat, until I came here, to Lug's Gardens, to the daughters of Forgall, nephew of Tethra the king of the Fomóire.⁴ But enough about me. Tell me about yourself.'

'Not hard to tell, indeed,' Emer replied. 'Tara among women, fairest of maidens, a paragon of chastity, a prohibition that is not heeded, a watcher who sees no-one. A modest woman is a dragon, to whom no-one dares come near. A king's daughter is a hearth of hospitality, a road that cannot be entered. I have champions who watch me and guard me, in case anyone comes to carry me off against their will and my father's.'

'Who are these champions who guard you?' said Cú Chulainn.

'They are: two Luis, two Luaths - Luath and Lath Goible, son of Tethra; Triath and Trescath, Brian and Bolor, and Bas son of Omnach; eight Connlas; and Conn son of Forgall. Every one of them has the strength of a hundred and the feats of nine.

'And it would be hard to tell you of all the powers of Forgall himself. He is stronger than any labourer, wiser than any druid, and more perceptive than any poet. It'll take more than your fancy feats to fight him, for he is the very epitome of manly deeds.'

'You don't count me among those strong men?' said Cú Chulainn.

'Have you performed famous deeds?'

'I swear to you,' said Cú Chulainn, 'my deeds will be recounted among the deeds of the most glorious heroes.'

'How strong are you?'

'I'll tell you,' he said. 'At my weakest, I'm a match for twenty. A third of my strength is enough for thirty. On my own, I can fight off forty. Under my protection, a hundred are safe. Warriors avoid the battlefield for fear of me, and whole armies flee before me.'

'Not bad for a boy,' said Emer, 'but you aren't a fully-fledged chariot-chief yet.'

⁴ Fomóire: mythological enemies of Ireland, representing chaos and evil. May be 'pre-gods' like the Greek Titans.

‘I have been well brought up by my foster-father Conchobor, among chariot-chiefs and champions, jesters and druids, poets and learned men, nobles and landlords, and I have learned all their manners and gifts.’

‘And who were they, these illustrious foster-fathers of yours?’ said Emer.

‘Sencha of the Fair Speech taught me to be wise and quick-witted. Blai the Hospitaller brought me up because of his blood ties, and he taught me hospitality. Fergus mac Róich fostered me, and taught me fighting skills and bravery. I learned excellence in speech at the knee of Amergin the poet. His wife Finnchoem reared me, so Conall Cernach is my foster-brother. And my mother’s father Cathbad taught me knowledge of the gods. All the men of Ulster have had a hand in my upbringing.

‘I was called into being by Lug,⁵ son of Conn mac Ethlenn, when my mother Deichtine visited the house of the Mighty One of the *Brug na Bóinde*.⁶ And what about you? How have you been raised here in Lug’s Gardens?’

‘Not hard to tell, indeed,’ Emer replied. ‘I was brought up in ancient virtues, in lawful behaviour, chastity, the dignity of a queen. I possess every virtue a woman can possess.’

‘And fine virtues they are indeed,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Isn’t it right that we should be together? I’ve never met a girl before that I can talk to like this.’

‘One more question,’ said Emer. ‘Have you a wife already?’

‘No, I don’t,’ he replied.

‘I may not marry before my older sister, Fial, who you see beside me,’ said Emer. ‘She is excellent in handiwork.’

‘But it’s not her I’ve fallen in love with. Besides, I have never accepted a woman who has known a man before, and I have been told she used to belong to Coirpre Nia Fer.’

⁵ Lug is an important figure from the Mythological Cycle, who appears in The Battle of Mag Tured. A god with solar attributes, he may be the god Caesar was referring to when he said that ‘Mercury’ was the most honoured of the Gaulish gods.

⁶ The *Brug na Bóinde*, the “dwelling on the Boyne”, is the complex of Neolithic passage tombs centred around Newgrange.

While they were talking, Cú Chulainn saw Emer's breasts over the top of her dress. 'I see a fair plain,' he said. 'I could rest my weapon there.'

'No-one comes to this plain unless he has killed a hundred at every ford from the Ford of Scenn Menn at Ollbuine to Banchuing Arcait, where swift Brea breaks the brow of Fedelm.'

'I see a fair plain,' repeated Cú Chulainn. 'I could rest my weapon there.'

'No-one comes to this plain unless he has achieved the feat of leaping over three walls; killing three groups of nine men with one blow, yet leaving my three brothers, one of whom is in each group, unharmed; and then, accompanied by them and my foster-sister, bringing my weight in gold out of Forgall's stronghold.'

'I see a fair plain. I could rest my weapon there.'

'No-one comes to this plain unless he has gone without sleep from Samain to Imbolc, from Imbolc to Beltine, and from Beltine to Bron Trogain.'

'Everything you have commanded, I will do,' said Cú Chulainn.

'Your offer is accepted,' said Emer. 'But one more question: who are you?'

'I am the nephew of the man who disappears in another in the wood of Badb,' he replied. 'I am the hero of the plague that befalls dogs.'

After that, Cú Chulainn left, and they said nothing more to each other that day. As they were leaving, Láeg asked Cú Chulainn what they had been talking about, and he explained that he had been wooing Emer. They had had to disguise their words, because if Forgall knew, he wouldn't give his consent. He then related and explained everything that had been said, and this passed the time until they returned to Emain Macha, where they spent the night.

Emer's foster-sisters all told their parents about the young man who had come in his splendid chariot, and the conversation he had with Emer, which they hadn't understood. Their parents all told Forgall that Emer had been talking to Cú Chulainn.

'It's true,' said Forgall, 'the madman from Emain Macha has been here talking to Emer, and she has fallen in love with him. But it'll do them no good – I'll put a stop to it.'

So Forgall the Wily went to Emain Macha, disguised as an envoy from the king of the Gauls, to talk to Conchobor. He brought

him golden treasures, and Gaulish wine, and all sorts of good things. He was given a great welcome. On the third day he sent away his men, and Cú Chulainn, Conall and the other chariot-chiefs were praised before him. He agreed that the chariot-chiefs performed marvellously, but that if Cú Chulainn were to go to Domnall the Soldierly in Alba, his skill would be even greater; and that if he went to Scáthach to learn the feats of arms, he would be greater than all the warriors of Europe.

Forgall suggested this in the hope that Cú Chulainn would never return. If he became Scáthach's friend, he hoped that would lead to his death through her wildness and fierceness. Cú Chulainn agreed to go, and Forgall bound himself to give Cú Chulainn whatever assistance he desired, if he left within a certain time. Forgall went home, and the warriors got up in the morning and prepared to do as they had vowed.

Cú Chulainn, Lóegaire Búadach and Conchobor set out that morning. Some say Conall Cernach went with them as well. But first Cú Chulainn went across Mag Breg to visit Emer. He talked to her before getting on board ship, and she told him it had been her father who had suggested the trip in order to stop the two of them meeting. She told him to be on his guard wherever he went, in case Forgall tried to destroy him. They both promised to be faithful to each other until they met again, unless one of them should die in the meantime. They bade each other farewell, and Cú Chulainn left for Alba.

When they came to Domnall in Alba, he taught them to heat up a flagstone with bellows, and perform on it until their soles were black and livid. He taught them to climb a spear and perform on its point. Domnall's daughter Dornolla fell in love with Cú Chulainn. She was incredibly ugly, with enormous knees, back-to-front feet, dark grey eyes and a jet-black face. She had a large forehead, and rough, straggly, bright red hair wound round her head. Cú Chulainn refused her, and she swore revenge.

Domnall said that Cú Chulainn could not gain complete knowledge of the arts of war until he went to Scáthach, who lived in the east of Alba. So the four Ulstermen set off across Alba, but Dornolla raised a vision of Emain Macha before them, which neither Conchobor nor Conall nor Lóegaire could go past. Dornolla's plan had been to separate Cú Chulainn from his companions, and it worked. Other versions say that it was Forgall the Wily who raised

the vision in the hope that Cú Chulainn would turn back, and thus be shamed by his failure to fulfil his vow; or, that if he were to proceed to Scáthach alone, he would be more likely to be killed. But Cú Chulainn's will was strong, and he persevered without his companions.

But when Cú Chulainn realised his comrades were no longer with him, he stopped from sorrow and fatigue. He didn't know where to find Scáthach, but he had sworn to his comrades that he wouldn't return to Emain Macha until he had found her. He was lost. After a while he saw a terrible beast, like a lion, coming towards him. It kept its eye on him, but didn't attempt to harm him. Whichever way he tried to go, the beast blocked his way, so he took a leap onto its back. He didn't guide it, but let it go where it wanted, and they travelled for four days. At the end of that time, they came to the limits of the inhabited world, and saw an island where some lads were rowing in a small boat. The lads laughed to see such a fearsome beast doing service to a man. Cú Chulainn leapt off its back. The beast left him then, and he bade it farewell.

He carried on, and came to a house deep in a glen. Inside was a beautiful maiden. 'Welcome, Cú Chulainn,' she said.

He asked her how she knew him, and she told him that they had both been foster-children of Wulfkin the Saxon, and had learned sweet speech from him. She gave him food and drink, and he left her and continued his journey.

Then he met a brave youth called Eochaid Bairche, who gave him the same welcome. They talked together, and Cú Chulainn asked him how to get to Scáthach's stronghold. The young man showed him how to cross the Plain of Ill-Luck that was ahead of him. On the nearer half of the plain, a traveller's feet would freeze to the ground; on the farther half the grass would rise and hold them fast on its blades. The youth gave Cú Chulainn a wheel, and told him to follow its track across one half of the plain; he also gave him an apple, and told him that its track would lead him across the other half. He warned him that beyond the plain was a glen with a single, narrow path through it. The glen was full of monsters sent by Forgall to destroy him. Beyond that, a terrible mountain stronghold lay between him and Scáthach's house.

Then Cú Chulainn bade farewell to the youth, and they wished blessings on each other. The youth told him how to win honour at Scáthach's house, and prophesied about his future exploits. Cú

Chulainn took his leave of him and went on. He followed the youth's instructions, and crossed the plain and the perilous glen safely. He arrived at a camp where Scáthach's pupils were, and asked them where she was. 'On that island over there,' he was told.

'How do I get there?' he asked. 'Over the Cliff Bridge, which no-one can cross unless he has trained in arms.' The bridge was low at either end and high in the middle, and whenever anyone stood on one end, it would tip up and throw him off. Some versions say that a crowd of Irish warriors were there, studying under Scáthach, and that they were: Fer Diad son of Daman, Noisiu son of Uisliu, Lóch Mór son of Mofemis, and Fiamain son of Fora; and many others besides. But this version doesn't mention them at this point.

Cú Chulainn tried to cross the bridge three times, and failed each time. The other pupils jeered at him. His ríastrad came upon him, and he made the hero's salmon leap and landed right in the middle of the bridge. He was then able to reach the other side before the bridge tipped up and threw him off. He went up to the door of the stronghold, and knocked it with the butt of his spear, so hard that it went through it. Scáthach was told. 'This must be someone who has had full training elsewhere,' she said. She sent her daughter Úathach to find out who he was.

When she saw him, she was so moved by desire she was speechless. She went to her mother and sang his praises, and she resolved to sleep with him that night. Scáthach approved of this course of action, so she pretended to be a servant, and served him food and water. But he hurt her, breaking her finger. Hearing her shriek, the army of the stronghold ran to help. Their champion, Cochor Cruife, stood forward to fight Cú Chulainn, but Cú Chulainn defeated and killed him. Scáthach was sorrowful at the death of her champion, and told Cú Chulainn to take his place.

On the third day Úathach advised Cú Chulainn that, if he had come to achieve a hero's valour, he should make the hero's salmon leap to reach Scáthach, who sat in the great yew tree when teaching her sons, Cuar and Cett. He should set his sword between her breasts and demand three wishes: that she teach him without neglect; that he might marry Úathach without the payment of a bride-price; and that she should foretell his future, for she was a prophet.

Cú Chulainn did as she said. He went to where Scáthach was, placed his feet on the two edges of the weapons chest, and put the point of his sword to her heart. 'Death hangs over you!' he said.

'Name your demands,' said Scáthach. 'If you can utter three demands in one breath, I will grant them.' Cú Chulainn made his demands as Úathach had told him. Úathach was given to him, and he was taught skill in arms.

During the time Cú Chulainn was with Scáthach, and was the husband of Úathach, there was a famous man of Munster called Lugaid mac Nois, a foster-brother of Cú Chulainn, who was the grandson of the renowned king of Munster, Alamiach. He went east with twelve chariot-chiefs of the kings of Munster, to woo the twelve daughters of Coirpre Nia Fer. But it turned out all the girls were already betrothed. When Forgall the Wily heard about this, he went to Tara and told Lugaid that the best maiden in Ireland, both in beauty and handiwork, was in his house and unmarried. Lugaid was most pleased, and Forgall betrothed Emer to him. He also betrothed twelve of his foster-daughters to the twelve chariot-chiefs.

Lugaid came to Forgall's stronghold for the wedding. But when Emer was brought to him, she took his cheeks in her hands, and laid it on the truth of his honour and his life that she loved Cú Chulainn, that her father was against it, and that anyone else who took her as his wife would suffer loss of honour. For fear of Cú Chulainn, Lugaid didn't dare marry Emer, and returned home.

At that time Scáthach was at war with other tribes, who were ruled by the princess Aífe. Their two armies assembled to fight, but Scáthach had left Cú Chulainn behind, tied up and under the influence of a sleeping potion. She didn't want him to go into battle, in case anything happened to him. But the sleeping potion, which would knock anyone else out for twenty four hours, only kept Cú Chulainn out for an hour. He went forth with Scáthach's two sons against three of Aífe's warriors, Cuar, Cett and Cruife, the sons of Ilsuanach, and defeated them single-handed.

The next morning battle was joined again, and the two armies marched forward until they met face to face. The three sons of Eis Enchenn, Cire, Bire and Blaicne, who fought for Aífe, stood forward and began to fight against the two sons of Scáthach. They went on the path of feats. Scáthach sighed. She was worried what might happen to her sons, because they were outnumbered three to two, and also because she was afraid of Aífe, who was the toughest

warrior-woman in the world. But Cú Chulainn stepped in to even the odds, and the sons of Eis Enchenn all fell by his hand.

Aífe then challenged Scáthach to single combat, and Cú Chulainn went forth as Scáthach's champion. But before he went, he asked what it was Aífe loved most. 'Her horses, her chariot and her charioteer,' replied Scáthach.

So Cú Chulainn and Aífe met on the path of feats, and began combat. Aífe broke Cú Chulainn's sword off at the hilt. But Cú Chulainn cried, 'Oh No! Aífe's chariot, her charioteer and her horses have fallen down the glen and all been killed!'

When Aífe looked round Cú Chulainn leapt towards her, seized her under her breasts, picked her up and carried her over his shoulder back to his own side. He then threw her to the ground and held his sword's point over her head.

'A life for a life, Cú Chulainn!' she said.

'Give me my three demands,' said Cú Chulainn, and she agreed. 'First, give hostages to Scáthach, and never oppose her again,' continued Cú Chulainn. 'Second, spend the night with me in front of your stronghold. Third, bear me a son.' Aífe promised, and it was done.

Soon, Aífe announced she was pregnant, and that it was a boy. 'On this day, seven years from now, I will send him to Ireland,' she said. 'Leave a name for him.' So Cú Chulainn left a gold thumb-ring for him, and told Aífe the boy was to come to Ireland to look for him as soon as the ring fitted. He said he was to be called Connla, and charged her that he should not identify himself to any one man, that he shouldn't turn aside for any man, and that he should refuse combat to no-one. Then Cú Chulainn returned to his own side.

As he went along the road, he met an old woman, blind in one eye. She told him to beware, and not get in her way on the road ahead. There was only room on that narrow cliff path for one, and only a sheer drop to the sea to the side. So he let her have the path, clinging to the cliff face with his toes, and let her pass. But as she passed, she hit at his big toe, trying to dislodge him. Cú Chulainn was expecting this. He leapt his hero's salmon leap back up onto the path, and cut her head off. She was Eis Enchenn, the mother of the last three men he had killed, and she had come to avenge them.

Scáthach's army soon went back to their own land, with the hostages that Aífe had given. Cú Chulainn stayed with Scáthach until he had recovered from his wounds.

At last, Cú Chulainn had mastered all the arts of war that Scáthach had taught him. These are the feats he learned: the apple-feat, the thunder-feat, the blade-feat, the supine-feat, the spear-feat, the rope-feat, the body-feat, the cat's-feat, the salmon-feat of a chariot-chief, the throw of the staff, the whirl of a brave chariot-chief, the *gáe bolga*,⁷ the wheel-feat, the breath-feat, the hero's holler, the blow, the counter-blow, running up a spear and standing straight on its point, the scythed chariot, and the hero's twisting round spear points. Then there came a message to return to his own land, and he took his leave.

Scáthach then told him what would happen to him in the future, chanting through the *imbas forasna*.⁸

‘Great peril awaits you, warrior of singular valour. Alone against a great herd, enemies all around you – your slashing blade cuts through their necks. Cattle and hostages carried off from Brega. Sétanta will be bloody in the stream. For a fortnight, a torrent of blood will shower your flesh, dripping from numberless splintered shields, as the cattle stride through passes. Facing a hedge of spears, you will suffer a wound of vengeance. A warrior performing feats faces a bare-handed warrior. Even as you overwhelm Ailill and Medb, a sickbed awaits you. Women-troops mourn the deed. I see Whitehorn fight against the loud-bellowing Brown Bull of Cooley.’⁹

Then Cú Chulainn boarded the ship for Ireland. The other travellers on board were these: Lugaid and Luan, the two sons of Loch; Fer Báeth; Larin; Fer Diad; and Durst son of Serb.

They came to the house of Ruad, king of the Western Isles, on Samain night. Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach were there, levying tribute, for in those days the Western Isles paid tribute to

⁷ *Gáe bolga*: Cú Chulainn's special weapon, a terrible, barbed spear.

⁸ *Imbas forasna*: ‘illuminating inspiration’, a prophetic technique.

⁹ This passage is in the form known as *rosc* or *rétoiric*, a kind of dense, alliterative prose-poem.

Ulster. Cú Chulainn heard sounds of wailing and lamentation in the king's stronghold. 'What is that lamentation for?' he asked.

'It is because Derbforgaill, daughter of Ruad, is being given to the Fomóire as tribute,' he was told.

'Where is she?' he said. 'Down on the shore below.' So Cú Chulainn went down to the beach, and came close to the maiden. He asked her the meaning of her plight, and she told him everything. 'Where do these men come from?' he asked. 'From that distant island,' she replied. 'Don't stay here where those villains can see you.' But he stayed, and killed three of the Fomóire in single combat. The last of them wounded him in the wrist, and the maiden gave him a strip of her dress to bind the wound. Then he left without telling her who he was.

The maiden returned to the stronghold, and told her father the whole story. Afterwards, Cú Chulainn came to the stronghold, like any other guest, and Conall and Lóegaire made him welcome. Many guests boasted that they had killed the Fomóire, but Derbforgaill didn't believe them.

The king had a bath prepared for all his guests, and Derbforgaill was to bathe them. They were all brought to her separately. When Cú Chulainn came for his bath, she immediately recognised him.

'I will give her to you,' said the king, 'and pay a generous dowry.' Cú Chulainn declined the offer. 'But if she likes, she can follow me a year from now to Ireland.'

After that, Cú Chulainn returned to Emain Macha and related his adventures. When he had rested, he set out for Forgall's stronghold to see Emer. But Forgall had placed so many guards around it that, a year later, he was still trying to get in.

At the end of the year he turned to Láeg, his charioteer, and said, 'Today's the day I'm supposed to have my tryst with Ruad's daughter. But we weren't wise – we didn't arrange where we were to meet. Let's go to the coast.'

When they came to the shore of Loch Cuan they saw two birds over the sea. Cú Chulainn put a stone in his sling and aimed at the birds. He hit one of them, and ran towards where it fell. But when he arrived, he saw two of the most beautiful women in the world – Derbforgaill, daughter of Ruad, and her handmaid. 'You have done an evil thing, Cú Chulainn,' said the wounded Derbforgaill. 'We came to see you, and you have hurt us.'

Cú Chulainn sucked the stone from the wound, and a clot of blood came with it. ‘I can’t marry you now,’ he said, ‘for I have tasted your blood. But I will give you to my companion, Lugaid of the Red Stripes.’ And so it was done.

Cú Chulainn once again determined to go to Forgall’s stronghold, and the scythed chariot was prepared for him. When he arrived at the stronghold, he did the hero’s salmon leap across the three walls and landed on the ground inside the stronghold. There, he dealt three blows with his sword, so that eight men fell from each blow, but one was left unharmed. Those three who survived were Emer’s three brothers, Scibur, Ibur and Cat. Forgall tried to jump onto the outside wall, fleeing from Cú Chulainn, but he fell and died. Then Cú Chulainn carried off Emer and her foster-sister, and their combined weight in gold and silver, and jumped back over the three walls of the stronghold.

Cries were raised from every direction around them. Scenn Menn rushed forward, and Cú Chulainn killed him at the ford which is now called the Ford of Scenn Menn. They escaped as far as Glondáth, where Cú Chulainn killed a hundred of their pursuers. ‘Great is the deed (*glond*) you have done,’ said Emer, ‘to have killed a hundred armed, able-bodied men.’ ‘Then its name from now on shall be *Glond-áth*, the Ford of the Deed,’ replied Cú Chulainn.

Then they came to the hill which is now called Crufoit, but was then called Rae-Ban (white field). He dealt so many vicious blows that streams of blood flowed down each side of it. ‘Thanks to you, the hill is covered in blood-stained turf,’ said Emer. And so it is now called *Cru-foit*, Blood Turf.

Their pursuers caught up with them at Ath n-Imfuait on the Boyne. Emer got out of the chariot, and Cú Chulainn pursued southward them along the banks, clods flying northward from the horses’ hooves. Then he turned and pursued them northward, and the clods flew southward. Hence it is called the Ford of the Two Clods.

From Ath Scenn Menn at Ollbine to the Boyne at Breg, Cú Chulainn killed a hundred at every ford, and so fulfilled every condition Emer had put on him, and came out of it all safely.

They reached Emain Macha shortly before nightfall. Emer was brought before Conchobor and the men of Ulster, and they welcomed her. But there was a sharp-tongued man there called Bricriu mac Carbada, who said, ‘Cú Chulainn’s going to find

tonight difficult to cope with. The woman he has brought here will have to sleep with Conchobor first – the first forcing of girls in Ulster is always his.’

Cú Chulainn shook with anger at this, so much that the cushion he was sitting on burst, and the feathers flew around the house. Raging, he ran outside. ‘This is a problem,’ said Cathbad. ‘The king can’t refuse to do what Bricriu says – but Cú Chulainn would surely kill any man who slept with his wife!’

‘Call Cú Chulainn back in,’ said Conchobor, ‘and we’ll try to cool his rage.’ When Cú Chulainn came back in, Conchobor told him to bring him all the herds around Sliab Fuait. So Cú Chulainn went out and rounded up all the pigs and deer, and all the other animals and birds he could find, and drove them onto the green of Emain Macha. By the time he had done that, his anger had subsided.

The men of Ulster argued, and eventually decided that Emer should sleep in Conchobor’s bed that night, but so should Fergus and Cathbad, to protect Cú Chulainn’s honour. They said that the whole of Ulster would bless the couple if Cú Chulainn accepted this. He did, and so it was done. The next day, Conchobor paid Emer’s dowry, and Cú Chulainn was given his honour price. Cú Chulainn then took Emer as his wife, and from then on they were never separated until they died.

Cú Chulainn's Shield

A law was made by the Ulstermen that they should make silver shields, and that the engraving on each shield should be different. At that time Cú Chulainn was at his training with Scáthach and Búanann. When he saw the kind of shields that were being made for him in that land, he went to the specialist shield-maker, Mac Endge.

‘Make me a shield,’ he said, ‘and make sure no other other Ulsterman’s shield has the same engraving on it.’

‘I can’t do that,’ said Mac Endge, ‘for I used up all my skill on the Ulstermen’s shields.’

‘I swear by my weapon,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘I will kill you if you don’t make it as I ask.’

‘I am under Conchobor’s protection against you,’ said Mac Endge.

‘Go to Conchobor for protection,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘and I’ll still kill you.’

Cú Chulainn headed home, and Mac Endge became very depressed. Just then he saw a man sitting in the skylight, a two-pronged fork in his hand.

‘This is terrible,’ said the man.

‘You’re telling me!’ said Mac Endge. ‘I’ll be killed if I don’t make Cú Chulainn his shield.’

‘Clean your house,’ said the man, ‘and have ashes strewn on the floor, as deep as a man’s feet.’

It was done as he said, and he marked out one of the portions of the design in the ashes. *Lúathrinde*¹⁰ (a point brought swiftly, or a point brought from the ashes) was the name of the point, and, as Dubdetba said, ‘If I were Mac Endge, this is how I would engrave,’ and further, ‘this is how Dubdetba makes shields.’

It was this *Lúathrinde* that was cut into Cú Chulainn’s shield, and *Dubán* (“Blackie”) was the name of the shield.

¹⁰ *Lúathrinde* (‘swift-point’ or ‘ash-point’) is thought to be the name of a motif or style of engraving, or perhaps the instrument used to create such engraving. The “two-pronged fork” wielded by Mac Endge’s mysterious visitor seems likely to be a pair of compasses, such as would have been used to create the familiar *La Tène* style of Celtic art.

The Death of Aífe's Only Son

How did Cú Chulainn come to kill his own son? Not hard to tell.

When Cú Chulainn went to study the arts of war with Scáthach nÚanaind daughter of Airdgеме, he slept with Aífe daughter of Airdgеме, and left her pregnant. He told her she would bear him a son.

‘Take this gold thumb-ring,’ he told her, ‘and when it fits the boy, let him follow me to Ireland. He must stand aside for no-one, identify himself to no-one, and refuse combat to no-one.’

Seven years later, the boy set out in search of his father.

The Ulstermen had gathered at Tracht Esi, and out on the sea they saw the boy approaching in a bronze boat, with golden oars in his hands. He had a pile of stones in the boat, which he cast from his slingshot at the birds overhead, stunning them out of the sky. Then he revived them and sent them back into the air. He performed a feat with his jaw and his hands, faster than the eye could see, and modulated his voice so as to stun the birds out of the air a second time, before reviving them once again.

‘I fear for whatever land he’s going to,’ said Conchobor. ‘If a mere boy can perform such feats, the grown men from his country would surely pound us to dust if they ever came here. Someone must go and meet him, and prevent him from coming to land.’

‘Who should go to meet him?’ asked the Ulstermen.

‘Who else but Condere mac Echach?’ replied Conchobor.

‘Why should it be Condere?’

‘That’s not hard to explain,’ said Conchobor. ‘When good sense and eloquence are required, Condere possesses more than enough.’

Condere agreed to go. He met the boy as he came ashore.

‘You will come no further, little boy,’ he said, ‘until you tell us where you come from and who your people are.’

‘I will identify myself to no-one,’ replied the boy, ‘and I will turn aside for no-one.’

‘You will not enter this country until you identify yourself.’

‘I will go where I am going,’ said the boy, and with that he turned away.

‘Turn back to me, boy,’ said Condere. ‘Your prowess is great. You have the pride of a pure-bred Ulster hero.’

Conchobor extends his welcome. If you turn your left side¹¹ to him, the Ulstermen will rise up against you. Turn to me, and you will have his ear.

‘Come to Conchobor, the impetuous son of Ness. Come to Sencha, the victorious son of Ailill; to red-bladed Cethern, son of Fintan, whose fire wounds battalions; to Amergin the poet, and Cúscraid of the great hosts. I welcome you. Conall Cernach invites you to the stories, songs and laughter of war-heroes. Blai Briuga, the great hero, will be very insulted if you pass up his hospitality. It is not right to shame so many.’

‘I have sworn to oppose you, although you have no beard or manly hair, unless you pay heed to the men of Ulster.’

‘You speak well,’ said the boy, ‘and you will have an answer. I have modulated my voice, and unerringly cast little spears from a chariot. I have gathered a beautiful flock of birds, with no need for the hero’s salmon leap. I have vowed great feats of arms against any who oppose me. Go to the Ulstermen, and ask if they want to come against me all at once or one at a time. Now turn back, for even if you had the strength of a hundred, you couldn’t hold me back.’

‘Then let someone else come and talk to you,’ said Condere. He went back to the Ulstermen, and told them what had been said.

‘I will not see Ulster shamed while I live,’ said Conall Cernach, and went to meet the boy. ‘Those were pretty games, boy,’ he said.

‘They’ll work just as prettily on you’ said the boy. He put a stone in his slingshot, and sent a stunning-shot into the air. The roar of thunder it created knocked Conall headlong. Before he could get up, the boy had tied his hands with his shield-strap.

‘Send someone else to meet him!’ cried Conall, but the whole army was put to shame.

Then Cú Chulainn stepped forward towards the boy, performing his feats. Emer, daughter of Forgall, put her arm around his neck.

‘Don’t go down there,’ she said. ‘It’s your own son. Don’t slaughter that impetuous, well-born boy – he’s your own flesh and

¹¹ Turning to the right, with the sun, brought good luck, but turning to the left was an insult.

blood. It is neither right nor wise to fight him. Don't commit this blood-outrage against the sapling of your tree. Remember Scáthach's warning – if Connla turns his left side, your bombast will be little protection. Turn back and listen to me, for my advice is good. I know the boy's name. He is Connla, Aífe's only son.'

'Silence, woman!' said Cú Chulainn. 'I don't need a woman holding me back from feats of glory and triumph. Such deeds are not performed with female assistance, nor is there gratitude in the eyes of a king because of it. From Connla's body a mist of blood on my skin. Beautifully my spears will consume the fair little javelin. Whoever he is, wife, I must kill him for the honour of Ulster.'

So he went down to meet him. 'Those were pretty games, boy,' he said.

'Prettier than the games I find here,' replied the boy. 'Two of you have come to face me, and I still haven't identified myself.'

'Must I come to face a little boy?' said Cú Chulainn. 'Identify yourself, or die.'

'So be it!' said the boy. He rose against Cú Chulainn, and they struck each other. With one precise stroke, he cut Cú Chulainn's hair to the scalp.

'Enough of this mockery,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Let's wrestle.'

'But I don't even come up to your belt,' said the boy. So he stood on two standing stones. He threw Cú Chulainn between the stones three times, without moving his feet. The marks of his feet are still there, which is why the place is called Tracht Esi, The Strand of the Mark.

Then they wrestled in the water, and the boy ducked Cú Chulainn three times.

But Cú Chulainn rose from the water and played him foul with the *gáe bolga*, which Scáthach had taught only to him. It sped through the water, and spilled the boy's innards at his feet.

'That's the one thing Scáthach never taught me,' said the boy. 'You have wounded me grievously.'

'I have,' said Cú Chulainn. He took the boy in his arms, carried him from the shore, and brought him before the Ulstermen.

'Men of Ulster, here is my son.'

'Alas, alas,' they all cried.

‘True enough,’ said the boy. ‘If I’d stayed with you for five years, I’d have killed men of all lands for you, and you’d rule kingdoms as far afield as Rome. Now show me the great men around me, and I will take my leave of them.’

He embraced each of them in turn, saluted his father, and died. Laments were raised, his grave dug and his marker set. For three days and nights after his death, no calf in Ulster was allowed to its mother.

The Death Of Derbforgaill

Derbforgaill, daughter of the king of Lochlann,¹² fell in love with Cú Chulainn without seeing him, because of the stories she had heard about him. So she and a handmaid of hers took the form of swans and flew to Loch Cuan with a golden chain between them to seek her beloved.

Cú Chulainn was hunting with his foster-brother Lugaid Riab nDerg (of the Red Stripes), son of the Trí Finn Emna (the Fair Triplets). Lugaid saw the birds flying overhead and challenged Cú Chulainn to have a cast at them. He shot a stone from his slingshot at them, which went through Derbforgaill's ribs and penetrated her womb. Suddenly there were two human forms there on the shore.

'I came after you, and you treated me cruelly,' said Derbforgaill to Cú Chulainn. 'That's true,' said Cú Chulainn. He sucked the stone out of her side, and a clot of blood came with it.

'I came in quest of you,' repeated Derbforgaill. 'Don't say that,' said Cú Chulainn. 'I can't join with someone whose side I have sucked.'

'In that case, give me to whoever you choose.'

'I'd like you to go to the noblest young man in Ireland, Lugaid of the Red Stripes,' said Cú Chulainn.

'So long as I can still see you, then let it be so.' So she went with Lugaid, and bore him children.

One day in winter, when it had snowed heavily, the men made pillars of snow. The women stood on the pillars, and said, 'Let's piss on the pillars and see whose urine penetrates furthest. The best of us to keep will be the one who can reach right down to the ground.'

None of them could manage to penetrate all the way through the pillar to the ground. They called Derbforgaill, but she wasn't keen – she thought it was foolish. But she was persuaded, and went onto the pillar, and her urine penetrated all the way to the ground.

The women said, 'If the men knew about this, no woman would be loved compared to her.' So they plucked out her eyes, and cut

¹² Lochlann: Scandinavia, usually Norway

off her nose, and her ears, and her hair, and the flesh of her thighs. 'No-one will love her now.'

After suffering this torture, Derbforgaill was taken back to her house.

The men were assembled on a hill outside Emain Macha. 'Strange,' said Cú Chulainn, 'that there is snow on the roof of Derbforgaill's house.'

'She must be on the point of death!' cried Lugaid.

They rushed to the house, but when she heard them coming Derbforgaill locked herself in. 'Open up!' said Cú Chulainn.

Derbforgaill sang a long lament, bidding farewell to Cú Chulainn and Lugaid. It is said that by the time they managed to get inside, her soul was no longer in her. Lugaid died on seeing her like that.

Cú Chulainn went to the house of the women and overturned it, killing everybody inside. He killed 150 queens that day. He then erected Lugaid and Derbforgaill's tomb and stone, and mourned them.

The Elopement of Emer

Once, Cú Chulainn and Láeg went to hunt birds by the side of Traig Baile near the head of Sliab Breag, leaving Emer behind in Dundalk.

That day Tuir Glesta, the son of the king of Lochlann, came to Ireland.

When he came to Dundalk, Emer saw him and immediately fell in love with him. She and her maid went with him. He plundered Muirthemne Plain, along with Crich Conaill and the lands of Sualtam mac Róich, and took the spoils to the harbour, where he and his men embarked in their ship. They took the plunder to the Isle of Man, the Isles of the Foreigners, and Anglesey.

When the news reached Cú Chulainn, he and Láeg went to Anglesey, where he challenged Tuir Glesta to combat. Tuir Glesta accepted the challenge, and mighty was the combat between them. Tuir Glesta was killed, and Cú Chulainn ransacked his stronghold before taking Emer home with him.

The Training of Cú Chulainn

When Cú Chulainn was a young lad, fine in every way, pride of spirit came upon him, and he wanted to go out into the world to get his training.

His training began in Glenn na Luthaige in Munster, with Uathan of the Glen. But he wasn't there long before he went back across Ulster, intending to get his training in the East. He went with two comrades, Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach, and they launched Conall's ship, the Engach, onto the sea, and sailed to Alba. In that country there lived a warrior-woman called Dordmair, daughter of Domnall Mildemail, the soldierly.

She gave them a great welcome, and foot-washing and bathing was provided for them. They stayed the night, and the next morning the maiden asked them why they had come.

'We have come to learn warfare and heroic feats,' they replied.

She went before them, and demonstrated for them her feats of valour and warfare, as teachers often reveal their secrets to pupils who come to them from foreign lands. She had a five-barbed spear brought to her. She stuck the staff into the ground, point up. The druidess then leapt into the air, and landed on her breast on the point of the spear, but even her clothes suffered no damage. She balanced on the point of the spear for some time. Then she challenged Lóegaire, Conall and Cú Chulainn to do it.

'Which of us should try it?' they asked.

'Whichever of you is the noblest,' replied Dordmair. It was said that Conall Cernach, son of Amergin, was the noblest and boldest of them, so he went first, but although he was strong and brave, could throw straight and true, and was a terror in battle, he couldn't perform this feat. Lóegaire tried it, but he couldn't do it either.

'It would be a disgrace to us three Ulstermen if none of us could do it,' said Cú Chulainn. He stood up, leapt up hoveringly, and landed on his chest on the point of the spear. 'It wouldn't bother me if this were my resting place for the rest of the day,' he said.

The maiden said to the other two, 'You can keep all the distinctions you have earned up to now. Your blood has dried up, and your sinews have hardened. From now on you will gain no

honour from feats of heroism. If you like, I can teach you how to be servants.’ Conall refused on behalf of both of them.

Dordmair asked Cú Chulainn to stay with her, and they all agreed he should. Conall and Láegaire bade them farewell and went home, and Cú Chulainn stayed and learned the arts of war.

One day, a year later, Cú Chulainn was performing the feats he had learned when a lone, huge man, black as coal, approached him from the shore.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the man.

‘I am performing the feats I have learned over the past year,’ replied Cú Chulainn.

‘Where the feats of heroism are learned, those feats are not counted among them,’ said the man. ‘Is that true?’ asked Cú Chulainn, and the man said yes.

‘Is there anywhere in the world a greater warrior-woman than the one I’m with now?’ asked Cú Chulainn.

‘There is,’ said the man. ‘Scáthach, daughter of Buanuinne, king of Scythia, in the East.’

‘I’ve heard of her before.’

‘I’m sure you have. But it’s a long way from here to Scythia, little man.’

‘Will you tell me how to get there?’

‘I will not.’

‘Then may your evil rebound upon you, you spectral, shrivelled phantom,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘I’ve come this far without your help.’

The big man left, and Cú Chulainn went to bed. In the morning, at first light, he took his weapons and headed off towards Scythia. Few guides know what route he took, but he didn’t stop until he came to where Scáthach lived. There he saw beautiful, bright youths playing hurley and other games. If one youth was playing well, Cú Chulainn wouldn’t speak to him until he’d taken the ball from him and scored a goal. One of the two leaders of the youths came to him and said, ‘why did you score a goal against me?’

‘I’ve done it once, I’ll do it again,’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘You’d never have done it if we’d seen you from the beginning.’

‘You see me now, and I’ll still score against you.’

He scored three times, on his own against all the other youths. Four Irishmen, who were there for their training, came up and

embraced him, and asked him for news from Ireland. He asked them what feats they had learned in the past year.

‘We have to learn the Bridge of Leaps,’ they replied.

‘How long does it take to learn it?’

‘A quarter and a month and a year and three days and three nights.’

‘Will you show me how to do it?’

‘No!’ they replied. ‘You can learn it from Scáthach like everybody else.’

‘I’d like to see it,’ said Cú Chulainn, so they went to the bridge. They showed him how, when you stood on one end of the bridge, it became narrow, sharp and slippery, and would rise as high as a mast. Cú Chulainn leapt onto it, and began sliding down.

Scáthach saw his predicament from her bedchamber, which had seven doors, and seven windows between each door, and seven compartments between each window, and 150 girls in each compartment, each wearing a purple and blue cloak. There were 150 boys of the same age, brave champions of great deeds, opposite each door, outside and in, learning feats and heroism from Scáthach.

Scáthach’s daughter Úathach was with her. She had slender, white fingers, black eyebrows, and hair like burnished gold, and she was weaving gold thread with a bright-bordered weaver’s beam. When she saw Cú Chulainn on the bridge, she immediately fell in love with him, and she couldn’t think straight out of desire for the youth she had seen in that predicament. When she should have been weaving with gold thread, she wove with silver. She went as white as a lily, as red as blood, and back again.

Her mother noticed her appearance, and asked what was the matter with her that had caused such a change. She told her about the young man on the bridge, about how her heart was glad whenever he found a handhold, and terrified when he began to slip, that he would never see his mother or father again, and many would grieve for him.

‘Look well at that youth,’ said Scáthach, ‘for that childlike young man was shown to me not long ago. I saw that he was coming from Ireland in the West; that he would beat the Bridge of Leaps in an hour, even though everyone else needs a quarter, a month, a year, three days and three nights’ training to do it; that his

brave deeds would be told until the end of the world, and that he would be the Propheted Son.'

Cú Chulainn began to slip, and fell to earth. The three chief scholars of the world cried out, mocking him for his foolishness in attempting such a feat without first having been taught it by Scáthach. Cú Chulainn was enraged, and leapt up hovering, accompanying the wind, so that with one mad leap he landed on the middle pillar of the bridge. It didn't become narrow or sharp or slippery beneath him.

The three young Irishmen gave a great shout, praising Cú Chulainn for this feat, and celebrating that an Irishman had done something so impressive.

When Úathach saw what he had done, Scáthach told her to go to him, and show him to the House of the Barbers, where he was to sleep. So she went, and she thought she had never gone anywhere prouder or happier. She made Cú Chulainn welcome on behalf of her mother and herself, put her hand around his neck, and kissed him long and lovingly. Then she led him to his lodging. When they got to the House of the Barbers, Úathach told the youths there to be nice to Cú Chulainn, for he was a young Irish lad.

'Don't be angry with us for what we're going to do to you,' said the youths. 'There's 27 of us, each with 27 spears of smelted iron, and we do this to everyone who bests the Bridge of Leaps.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Cú Chulainn.

'We'll throw you up onto the ridge-pole at the top of the house, and throw our spears at you until there's no place on your body without a spear-wound.'

'What do you do that for?'

'So you will have no fear of the hardships that await you. They'll seem like nothing compared to what you'll go through tonight.'

'I have sworn to allow no man to pierce my body after challenging me, unless it's a warrior standing against me in open combat,' said Cú Chulainn.

The youths told him that if he depended on his own strength, that oath would not be broken. Then they grabbed him by the ankle, and hurled him up into the rafters, and everyone started throwing their spears and darts at him. Slowly, cunningly, Cú Chulainn made

his way down, resting on the point of each spear until he reached the ground.

No-one there had been taught a feat like that, neither by Scáthach, nor Aífe, nor Abloch, nor the Queen of the Land of Snow, nor Ess Enchenn; and none of them had ever seen anything like it until Cú Chulainn came. They threw him up into the roof again, and rage seized Cú Chulainn, and he grabbed his weapons and began killing and dismembering the youths. He cut off all their heads and put them on the gates of the fort, so that fear of him would be increased. The 150 champions outside Scáthach's door fell to him in the same way.

He stayed in the House of the Barbers that night, and in the morning he went to the door of Scáthach's bedchamber and asked if Scáthach was there. He demanded she give him the treasure and jewels and wealth that all the youths of the world brought to her.

'Young lad,' said Scáthach, 'there are many warriors in the world more able to ask for that, and more likely to get it.'

'They haven't managed it so far,' replied Cú Chulainn. 'I will.'

'What vengeance would you inflict on me, young man?'

'Rise up, and we will fight each other.'

'I'll do that,' said Scáthach.

'No you won't,' said her two sons, Cuar and Cet. 'We will.'

Scáthach tried to stop them, but Cuar, a broad-chested giant of a man, insisted he would fight Cú Chulainn alone. He stood up and came at Cú Chulainn, performing his 27 feats, his weapons whirling in his hands so that he looked like a bee collecting pollen from white flowers.

Cú Chulainn lifted his shield, with its seven bosses around the central boss, adorned with white steel, crystal and carbuncle and painted with many colours, to his shoulder. He took his heavy-smiting steel sword, hungry for blood, long and sharp enough among a multitude of bronze sickles to cut a hair against the stream. On his side was a long electrum scabbard on a beautiful silver belt. He took his two five-barbed spears, with their ample sockets, thick red shafts, and perfectly placed rivets. They went straight to the place of combat, and began to fight.

They planted their feet, moved their hands quickly, and dealt bold blows. Their spirits were raised, and the echo of the noise they made could be heard in the islands and rough-hewn rocks of the

surrounding districts. Cú Chulainn allowed Cuar to deal fierce blow after fierce blow, until he tired himself out so much that his legs were trembling, and he lost the strength from his arms. When Cú Chulainn saw his opponent was tiring, his strength arose, and with one blow he cut off his arm at the shoulder. A second blow cut off his right leg; a third cut off his left leg, and he fell face down on top of Cú Chulainn. He bit into Cú Chulainn's shoulder and tore off a strip of skin from his shoulder down to his fingertips - and that was Cú Chulainn's shearing.

Then Cú Chulainn beheaded Cuar son of Scáthach, with no regard for their fellow-pupilship, and brought his head back to Scáthach's bedchamber.

'What is it, my lad?' asked Scáthach.

'Do you recognise this head?'

'I do. You have done a violent deed, Cú Chulainn. A bed will be made for you at my feet, and you will be leeches and healed of your wounds for three months.'

That night, Úathach came to the room where Cú Chulainn was sleeping. 'What brings you here at this hour,' he asked.

'Attack is the best form of defence,' she replied.

'Don't you know it is taboo for a sick man to sleep with a woman?'

So she went back to her own room, and got dressed, and returned to Cú Chulainn and lay down beside him. Cú Chulainn was very annoyed, and as he reached his good hand out to her, he caught her finger a glancing blow which tore the skin from her hand, and wounded her greatly.

'May your evil rebound upon you, you spectral, shrivelled phantom,' cried Úathach. 'It's shameful to kill women, you know! You could have just sent me away - you didn't need to do that.'

'I prefer to send you away like this,' replied Cú Chulainn, 'because it causes you greater disgrace.'

'I will forgive you for what you have done, so long as you don't put me out of your bed tonight.'

'That's what you wanted all along!' said Cú Chulainn. 'You're not staying here!'

‘If you let me stay with you tonight, I’ll get my mother to teach you the three feats she has never taught to anyone else - Cuar’s feat, Cet’s feat, and the feat of eight waters.’

Cú Chulainn held her to her promise, and gave her what she wanted. The next day he asked her what the three feats were, and how he was to obtain them.

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Úathach. ‘This is how Scáthach goes to speak with the gods: with a feat-basket beneath her, unarmed. If you find her without her weapons, you will obtain from her all those feats. Follow her tomorrow, and tell her you’ll cut her head off unless she teaches them to you.’

In the morning, Cú Chulainn went to the Bridge of Leaps, and there she saw Scáthach in her feat-basket. She didn’t notice him until she saw the light glinting from his sword over her shoulder.

‘What do you want, little hound?’

‘To inflict death and extinction upon you.’

‘Spare me, and you will receive great rewards from me.’

‘What rewards would those be?’

‘Whatever you ask for,’ said Scáthach.

‘Then give me the three feats you have never taught to anyone else, and the friendship of your thighs, and your daughter.’

Scáthach gave her word, and taught him the three feats, and that night he had the festival of hand and bed with the girl, and from then on he had the friendship of thighs from the queen. He stayed with Scáthach for a year.

At the end of the year he prepared to go to the fortress of the other warrior-woman, Aífe, daughter of a king of Greece. He went to the door of Aífe’s bedchamber, and she welcomed him kindly. That night, he had the festival of hand and bed with her. He stayed a year with her, and then prepared to leave.

‘It would be wrong for you to go until you have achieved all the feats of bravery,’ said Aífe.

‘Have I not achieved them now?’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘No, you haven’t. I have three prize-feats, and they take a year’s training. If you learn them, you will surpass all the youths of the world.’

So Cú Chulainn stayed another year, and learned the feats, and prepared to leave. But Aífe said, ‘I’m pregnant, and it wouldn’t be right to go until you know what child I’ll have.’

‘If it’s a daughter,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘every mother has the profit of her daughter, so give her to the man you like yourself. If it’s a son, nurture him well, and teach him all the feats except the feat of the *gáe bolga*, for I’ll teach him that myself when he comes to Ireland.’

So Cú Chulainn left Aífe, and she was sorrowful at their parting. He was anxious that day to reach the Bridge of Leaps, but when he got there he saw a hideous hag, tall and ancient, carrying a vessel made from a fist of smelted iron, trying to cross from the other side.

‘Leave me the path so I can get past you, Cú Chulainn,’ she said.

‘There’s only room for one on this path,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘It’s as slender as a hair, as sharp as a thorn, and as slippery as an eel’s tail. The thorn of a thistle wouldn’t stick to this place.’

‘Curses and injunctions upon you if you don’t let me have the path,’ said the old woman.

‘Very well,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘You may have the path, even though you might get your death from it.’ He held onto the bridge with both arms and legs, and by a thunder-feat the hag seized him roughly and wounded him across the back and legs and arms. But he leapt up lightly, hoveringly, landed next to the hag, and cut her head from her body. This was the Death of Ess Enchenn, and Cú Chulainn did a good deed in killing her.

At that time Scáthach was instructing some Irish warriors who had come to her while Cú Chulainn was in Greece. They included Fer Diad and Fer Demain, sons of Damán; Fróech son of Fídach; Noísiu son of Uisliu; Loch Mór son of Mofemis; and Fergus son of Lua of the Long Mane. The day Cú Chulainn arrived was the day they were preparing to return home to Ireland, but they stayed another year, so that they might learn as many feats from Cú Chulainn (except the *gáe bolga*) as they had from Scáthach.

At the end of that year, Cú Chulainn said to Scáthach, ‘It’s time for me to return to Ireland with these warriors.’

‘You shall not go,’ said Scáthach, ‘until I bind a covenant of friendship between you, so that no-one will ever set any of you fighting against another, for you are in no danger from anyone else except each other. I place these injunctions upon you: if the stronger

man among you picks a fight with the weaker man, the weaker man will win; and, in the same way, if the weaker man picks a fight with the stronger, the stronger will win. Let none of you break these injunctions.’ They gave each other their hands to seal the covenant until doomsday. Then they took their leave of Scáthach, paying her the fees due to her for their training.

On their way home they came to the country of the Men of Catt. ‘This is the kingdom of the Men of Catt,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘and its king is Aed the Red. Which one of us will take the kingdom from him without a night’s rest?’

Cú Chulainn went down to the sea shore, to find birds or winged creatures to carry him to the fortress of Aed the Red, so that the women and youths there would marvel at this feat. Everyone else went on foot.

On the beach, Cú Chulainn saw a gathering of 100 men and 100 women sitting in the bay. In the midst of them was a beautiful maiden, the noblest in the world. The others were weeping and lamenting around her.

‘What is this great sorrow afflicting you?’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘The Fomóire take a tribute from this country every seven years,’ said the maiden, ‘the first-born of the king’s children. This time it has fallen to me to be taken as the tribute, for I am the dearest of the king’s children.’

‘How many come to take the tribute?’

‘The three sons of Alatrom of the Fomóire - Dub, Mell and Dubross.’

Soon they saw a large, well-manned vessel approach. A single warrior, dark, gloomy and devilish, sat in the stern of the ship, laughing so loudly you could see his entrails down his throat. At the sight of this, everyone except Cú Chulainn fled.

‘What’s he laughing at?’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘He thinks it is excellent that this year you should be added to the tribute,’ said the maiden.

‘He wouldn’t brag like that if he knew what would come of it.’

The big man came ashore and stretched forth his long, sinewy arm to seize Cú Chulainn before the royal tribute. Cú Chulainn raised his right arm, bared his sword, and struck off his head. His two brothers followed, but Cú Chulainn killed them as well, leaving their bodies lying neck-to-neck. He didn’t pay any heed to the

maiden, as he didn't think it honourable or sensible to speak to someone who had been abandoned by her people. When he caught up with his comrades, he didn't tell them anything of what had happened.

They came to the gate of the fortress and knocked. 'Who goes there?' said the gatekeeper.

'A band of Irish warriors,' they said, 'here in the east to complete our training,'

The gatekeeper went to the king, who was sad and mournful over the loss of his daughter, and told him there was a band of Irish warriors at the gate. 'Let them in,' said the king, and he gave them a hearty welcome.

The hadn't been there long when the maiden appeared. 'Well, my daughter,' said the king, 'are you sorrowful about your followers, or was it fear made you flee?'

'Neither,' said the maiden. 'One young lad came to me and stayed after all my followers had fled. He fought and killed the three sons of Alatom on my behalf. To prove it, you can send someone to bring back the rest of the tribute.'

'These are good tidings,' said the king, and sent a servant to fetch the rest of the tribute. He told the women of the fortress to bathe his Irish guests. They did so, one woman to each warrior. Aífe, Aed the Red's daughter, happened to be the one to wash Cú Chulainn, and his hand chanced to hers. 'Great is the valour and bravery of this hand,' she said.

'What's that, my daughter?' said the king.

'This is the hand of the one who killed the three sons of Alatom, and rescued me from my captivity.'

'Is this true?' the king asked the warriors. 'When you arrived was there one of you absent?'

'Cú Chulainn wasn't with us,' they replied. 'He had gone to the shore to look for birds to carry him to the fortress.'

'Is that the renowned warrior Cú Chulainn, whose fame has spread from Ireland? If so, then take the royal tribute, and the maiden.'

'May your evil rebound upon you, you spectral, shrivelled phantom,' said Fer Diad. 'None of us could hope to gain honour and distinction while we travel with you!' But Cú Chulainn ignored him. He divided the tribute in three - a third for the warriors, a third for

the hospitallers of the Men of Catt, and a third for the maiden's dowry. That night he had the festival of hand and bed with her.

They stayed a month and half there, and were shown great hospitality, before setting out for Ireland. They landed at Tráig na Folad in Ulster, and travelled on to fair Emain Macha, where Conchobor son of Fachtna Fathach lived. Conchobor kept the warriors on for a year, paying them with tributes from the province. It is said that no king anywhere on the continent of Europe at that time had heroes as brave and hardy as those in Ulster, the Champions of the Red Branch: Conall Cernach, Fergus mac Róich, Láegaire Búadach, Cormac Connlongas son of Conchobor, and the eight warriors who came to Ireland with Cú Chulainn.

At the end of the year Conchobor divided lands among them, posted them along the borders of Ulster, and brought them tribute from across the whole of Ireland by dint of their great valour.

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