




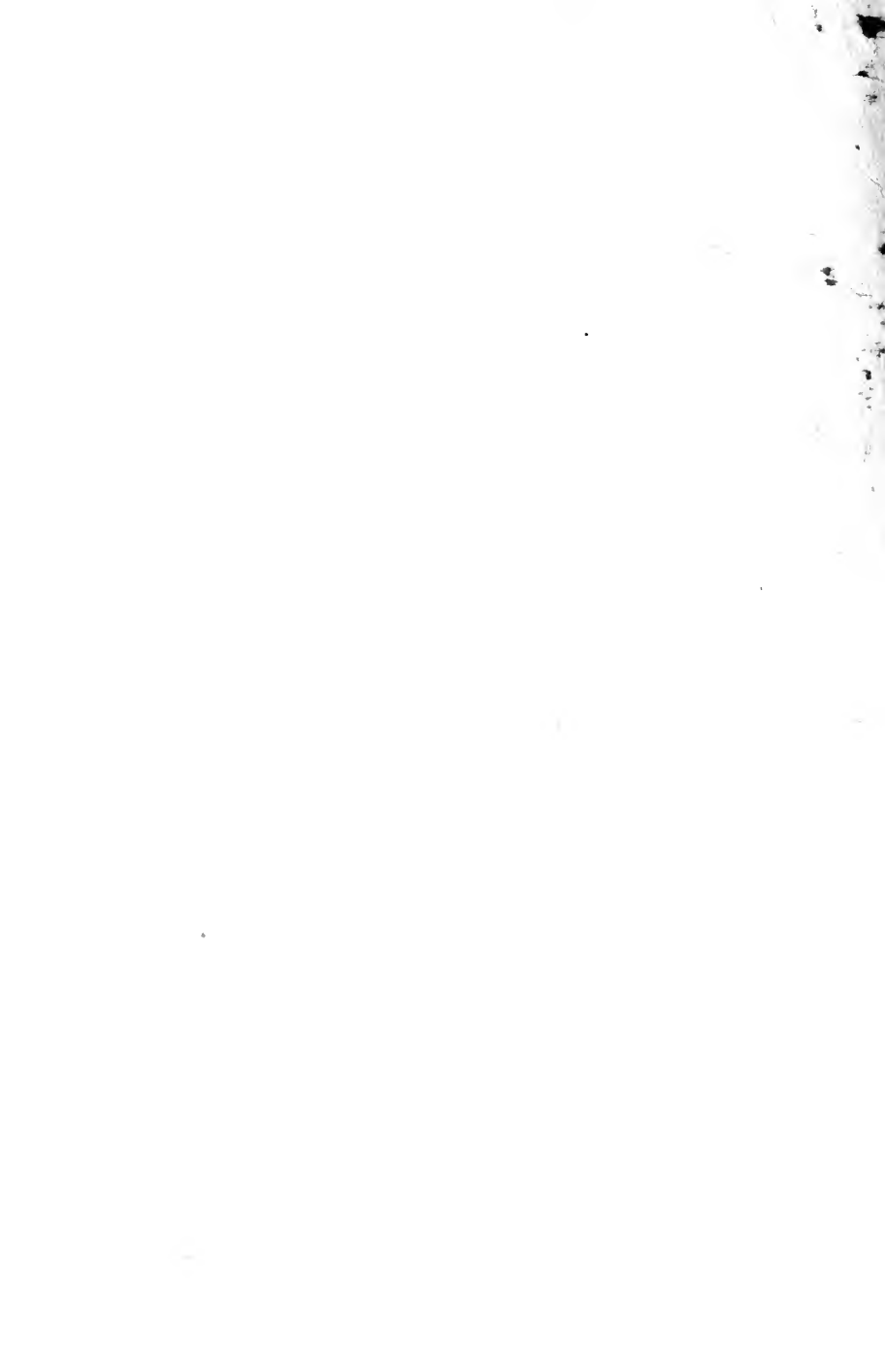
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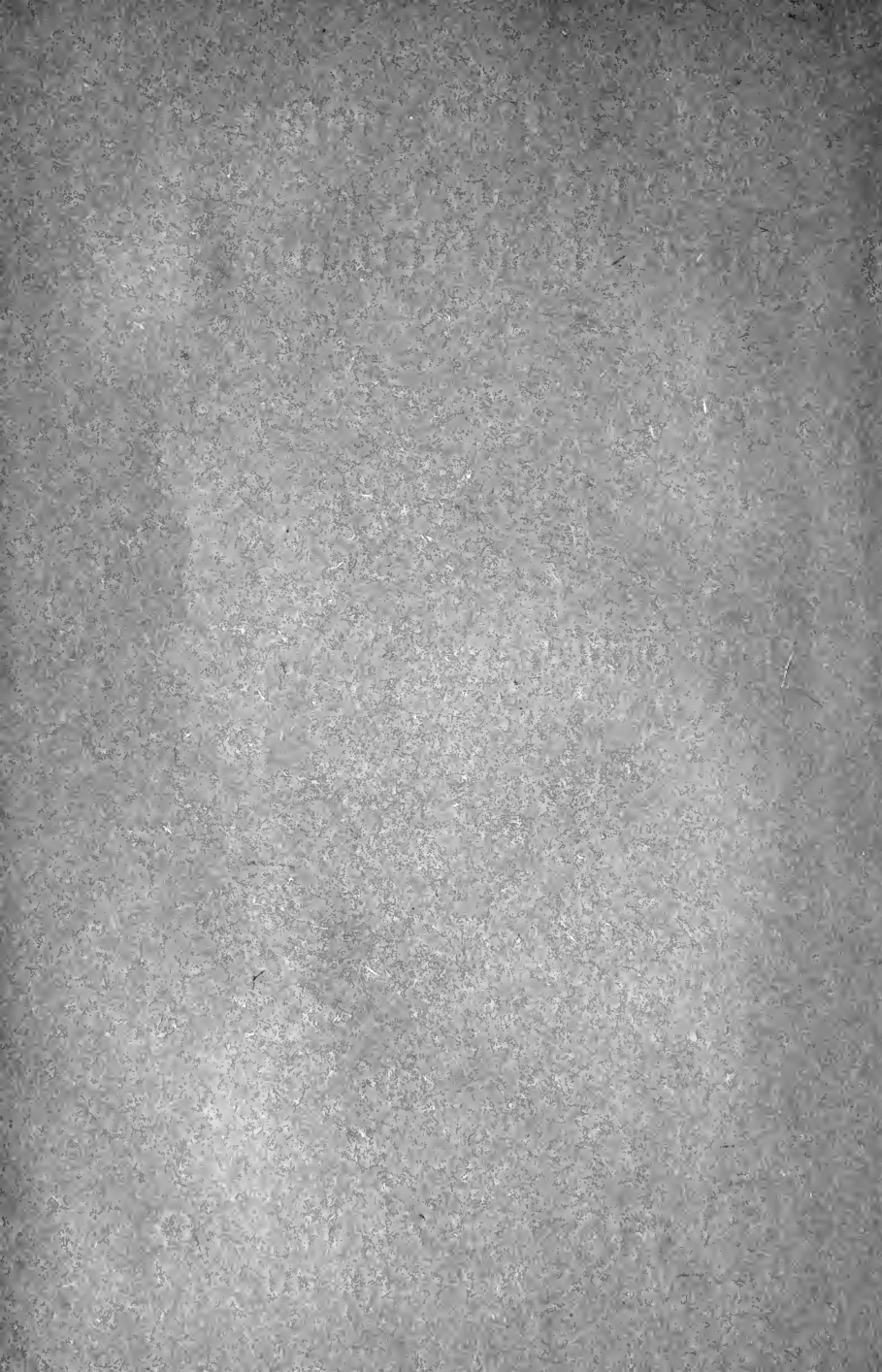


BRICRIU'S FEAST  
A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS  
WITH AN EPILOGUE

7579A.707

BY  
EIMAR O'DUFFY

MARTIN LESTER, LTD  
44 DAWSON STREET :: DUBLIN



BRICRIU'S FEAST

TO  
BULMER HOBSON

*who suggested  
the subject.*



**BRICRIU'S FEAST**  
A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS  
WITH AN EPILOGUE

4579A 727

BY  
EIMAR O'DUFFY

Produced by  
OF THE  
THEATRE

**MARTIN LESTER, LTD**  
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C.

CHARACTERS :

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CONCHUBAR MAC NESSA	KING OF ULSTER.
AILLILL	KING OF CONNACHT.
MAEVE	QUEEN OF CONNACHT.
FERGUS MAC ROIGH	EX-KING OF ULSTER.
CUCHULAIN.	
CONAL CEARNACH	
LAEGAIRE BUADACH.	
BRICRIU OF THE BITTER TONGUE.	
NIABH	HIS WIFE.
EMER	WIFE TO CUCHULAIN.
CUROI MAC DAIRE.	
THE CHIEF BARD OF CONNACHT.	
A MUNSTER POET.	
A LEINSTER POET.	
A CONNACHT POET.	
THE CHIEF BARD OF ULSTER.	
SERVANTS.	
WARRIORS.	

## ACT I.

*A small apartment, hung with silk, and furnished with two couches.*

*Niabh, wife of Bricriu, entering by the central curtained entrance, has one of the couches on her left. It is alongside the wall, and directly under a small window overlooking the banquetting hall of the palace. On her right is the other couch, placed near a larger window looking out on the distant hills. On this couch her husband, Bricriu, is sitting, looking out of the window.*

*Niabh is an anxious little woman, thoroughly devoted to her household, and, incidentally, to that important piece of its furniture, her husband.*

*Judged by modern standards, Bricriu is a tall man; but in the age of heroes his stature is counted inferior. In a land of warriors his active brain has driven him perpetually against remorseless and immovable barriers, and the consequent bitterness of his soul has left its mark on what should have been a fine and handsome face.*

*Niabh.*—Bricriu!

*Bricriu* [*inattentively*].—Um?

*Niabh.*—Are you tired gazing out of that window yet, or do you mean to sit there for ever?

*Bricriu.*—I'm waiting for a sight of the host of Ulster, and here I'll sit till I get it.

*Niabh.*—Then it's for ever you'll sit; for I don't believe they're coming at all.

*Bricriu.*—It's easy to see you're a Leinster woman, my queen, for it's little you know of the men of Ulster. They're only coming late so as to show their independence.

*Niabh.*—Independence, indeed! It's a calculated insult.

*Bricriu.*—Nothing of the kind, my dear. It rather amuses me, if anything [*turns back to window*].

*Niabh.*—What sort of a man are you at all? It's not long Celtchar, son of Uthecar, would be avenging a slight like that; no, nor Laegaire Buadach, nor Conal Cearnach. If anyone put an insult like that on Cuchulain he'd deal death and destruction through the five provinces of Ireland. [*Bricriu faces round again.*]

*Bricriu.*—And a lot of satisfaction he'd get out of

it in the end. Well, I'm content to avenge myself in my own way. [*Looks out of the window again.*]

*Niabh.*—'Tis only a woman would be content with bitter words. A hero wipes out his insults with blood. [*Walks away from him.*]

*Bricriu.*—How very bloodthirsty a domesticated woman can be when she's slighted! Surely you wouldn't have me murder a man for the simple offence of being late for dinner? By the way, that would make a good refrain for a ballad, wouldn't it? Listen to this:

If there's one thing I hate  
It's the man who is late  
For a feast or a fight or a girl or a game.  
He's beneath my contempt,  
And from mercy exempt;  
But I don't think I'd put him to death all the same.

He thinks that a grin  
Will atone for his sin;  
And an off-hand apology cover his shame.  
But although I detest  
All his tricks, like the pest—  
I don't think I'd put him to death all the same.

This waster of time,  
I'd rack him with rime,  
With metre his memory mangle and maim.  
His tomb I'd defile  
With an epitaph vile,  
But I don't think I'd put him to death all the same.

This shambler, this shifter,  
This dawdler, this diifter,  
To describe the man thoroughly, words are too  
tame.  
He's a fly in the ointment  
Who'd miss an appointment—  
But I don't think I'd put him to death all the same.

What do you think of that, bloodthirsty one? I shall publish it, and let them live to read it.

*Niabh* [*scornfully*].—Great revenge! If Celtchar, son of Uthecar, or Laegaire, or Conal, or any of the great champions of the Red Branch, were treated in this way, it's not sitting down, or with a smile, they'd take it.

*Bricriu*.—I know—I know. I know exactly what they'd all do under all circumstances. I know how many gallons of blood they'd spill for this, and how many heads they'd strike off for that. They always tell me, whenever they get the chance. It's all very interesting and thrilling, and it amuses the ladies, but, once and for all, let me tell you that I will not have them held up to me as models. I decline to conform to any type, and to this one especially . . . . What you see in the lot of them I really can't understand. Take Celtchar, son of what's-his-name for instance: What has he to talk about but his horses and his exploits?—and, such exploits! Then there's that bosthoon, Laegaire, a dour, heavy warrior—not too successful, either—and always full of excuses for his defeats. Conal Cearnach, isn't so bad, but his sense of humour is of the crudest. The best of them is that nice-looking boy, Cuchulain; but he's absurdly unsophisticated [*turns away*]. Really, Niabh, I don't see what you have to complain about.

*Niabh*—They're heroes, anyway. They lead simple, straight-forward lives, and their wives know what to expect from them. I never know what you'll be doing next, with your notions of amusement. Look at this entertainment you're giving now. Such extravagance and unnecessary display I never saw before. . . . Not that the King and the Red Branch aren't always heartily welcome, but I don't see why you had to build a whole new palace to entertain them in, with all sorts of outlandish arrangements, too . . . . this room, for instance. [*She pauses, questioningly. He keeps looking out of the window.*]

*Bricriu*—I wouldn't have done all this building if it hadn't been necessary; But it was. [*with finality*].

*Niabh*—Why was it necessary? [*She sits on the other couch.*]

*Bricriu*—It's a long story to tell, and the telling of it won't be pleasant to you, for it's full of what you'd call insults to me for which I didn't exact the toll of blood that Red Branch etiquette demands. [*He turns his back on the window and faces her.*]

*Niabh*—As if I wasn't used to that kind of thing by this time! Come, you can pass the time waiting for the Ulstermen by telling it to me.

*Bricriu*—Well, then, when I went up to Emhain Macha to invite Conchobar to feast with me, there was a great gathering of the Red Branch there, and I asked

them all to come. Conchubar at once said he'd come if the others would but Fergus raised objections. He doesn't like me, you know, because I was so amused at the way Conchubar did him out of his throne. So when everyone else had accepted, Fergus said, "No; for if we go, our dead will outnumber our living, when Bricriu has incensed us against one another."

*Niabh*—He was right, too. Bricriu, why are you always using that bitter tongue of yours to lash on better men to fight?

Bricriu—Pooh! What else are they good for? If they didn't fight they'd all grow fat and lazy with feasting and bragging, and instead of doing things they'd go and write bad poetry about great deeds they couldn't do and beautiful women they couldn't win. . . . Did you ever read any of the poetry Conal wrote when he was laid up after his fight with Mesgedra?

*Niabh*—No, I didn't. But go on with your story.

*Bricriu*—Well, then, when Fergus was finished, I said, "If you don't come you'll fare worse." "How?" says Conchubar. "Because," I said, "I'll stir up strife between the kings and the heroes, and between the heroes and the yeomen, till they slay one another man for man." "You won't be able to make us do that," says Conchubar. "Then," said I, "I'll stir up enmity between father and son, and if that fails, I'll make a quarrel between mother and daughter, and I'll set the women of Ulster at variance till they come to blows." "Then, we'd better come," said Fergus, "or mischief will be the consequence."

*Niabh*—You'd think it was a compliment to us to have them here and no trouble at all the way they talk.

*Bricriu*—There's worse to follow. After a long debate, they decided to come if I'd give hostages for my good behaviour, and retire from my house all the time they were to be in it. So I agreed to that.

*Niabh*—[*reproachfully*] Bricriu!

Bricriu—That's the reason for the new palace. If I were to feast them in our own hall, I wouldn't be able to see what goes on, and what would be the use of the entertainment then? But with this snug little parlour overlooking the new dining hall we should have an excellent view.

*Niabh*—But what's going to make them fight now, after all the precautions they've taken?

*Bricriu*—Oh, I saw to that without any delay, and set things going immediately after they had accepted the invitation.

*Niab*h [*excitedly, all her querulousness disappearing before her curiosity*].—How did you manage it? Tell me all about it. [*She goes over and sits beside him.*]

*Bricriu*—Well, when I was leaving Emain Macha, whom should I meet but that tiresome warrior, Laegaire “Hail! Laegaire the ‘Triumphant!’” said I, “thou mighty mallet of Bregia, hot hammer of Meath, victorious warrior of Ulster, what’s preventing you from being champion of Emain for ever?” said I. “I could be if I liked,” says Laegaire. “Then do what I tell you,” said I. “The Champion’s Portion of my house,” I said, “is worth having, for it’s not the portion of a fool’s house. There’s a cauldron full of wine enough for three heroes of Ulster in it. There’s a seven-year old boar in it, and a seven-year old bull, that have fed on nothing but sweet milk and herbs since they were born. Then, there’s a hundred cakes of wheat cooked in honey; twenty-five bushels of wheat went to the making of them. That’s the champion’s portion of my house,” said I, “and it’s for you to claim it when the feast is spread.” Then, said Laegaire, “there’ll be dead men among them if I don’t get it.” So, I wished him well, and went on. A little later I met Conal the Victorious, and I said, “Hail, Conal the Victorious, great are your victories over the heroes of Ulster. You are always the first of our host in advance and the last in retreat. Why shouldn’t you have the Champion’s Portion of Emain?” He gave utterance to bloodthirsty threats, very similar to those of Laegaire, against anyone who might attempt to deprive him of that honour, and so I told him that he must apply for the Champion’s Portion at my banquet, and I can tell you if I was treacherous with Laegaire I was twice as treacherous with Conal.

*Niab*h—That’s nothing to be proud of.

*Bricriu* [*complacently*].—No matter. I met Cuchulain after that, and I said, “Hail, Cuchulain, victor of Bray, bright banner of the Liffey, darling of Emain,” and so on (you know the kind of stuff, dear)—“it’s you that ought to have the Champion’s Portion of my house.” “And by the Gods of my people, I’ll have it,” says he, “and the head of anyone who contests it with me.” Cunning as I was with Conal I was

twice as cunning with Cuchulain. So, now, aren't we in for some sport?

*Niabh* [*too pleased at his cleverness to make more than a feeble remonstrance*—It's a shame for you, Bricriu, and he such a nice boy, too. [*Suddenly alarmed*] And, O, think of the damage they'll do if they begin fighting here. You remember the last time you set them quarrelling over at Celtchar's house, they wrecked the whole place, and Celtchar sent you the bill. If they get fighting here they'll ruin your beautiful new palace, and you along with it, if the building of it hasn't ruined you already.

*A sound of many horns is heard to the left, followed by the opening of doors, the bustle of feet, clank of armour, and murmur of voices.*

*Niabh* [*startled*]—The Ulstermen.

*Bricriu* [*Jumps up and looks out of the window behind him*]—And I missed seeing them coming. That's the result of talking. Come to the other window and watch them entering the hall.

*Niabh*—Come along. [*She runs over to the other window. He follows.*] Here they come, the noble men of Ulster. Conchubar, the High King, the battle-brand of the Gael. [*She says this without undue emphasis. It is the ordinary thing to say.*] And Fergus Mac Roigh, the Valiant, along with him. Eoghan Mac Durthacht, Cuscraid the Stutterer, and Sencha, son of Ailill. Laegaire the Triumphant, Conal the Victorious, and [*with more emphasis*] Cuchulain, the mighty hound of Ulster. [*Suddenly rhapsodising*] O, the gallant men of Ulster, bravest among the heroes of Ireland. Who can stand against them in the battle? Who does not tremble at their approach? Where have their warring squadrons not been seen? They have ravaged the fair fields of Meath and Leinster; Munster has not escaped them; Connacht turns pale at the memory of them. They have made conquests in the distant parts of Scotland, and the wild people of England have paid them tribute. Where in Ireland are there men like the men of Ulster?

*Bricriu* [*somewhat taken aback by this eloquence*]—Where indeed? [*In his normal tone*] You have the true Leinster woman's admiration for Ulster, my dear, and that's the main thing upon which Ulster's greatness rests. You kindly Southerners are so easily imposed upon. [*Pointing out of the window*] See the fine fellows sitting down eagerly to the feast. Let's drop



the apple of discord amongst them. [*He leans out of the window and raises his voice*] Welcome to you, men of the Red Branch, and remember that the Champion's portion of my house is not the portion of a fool's house. Give it, then, to him that is bravest among you. [*Turning back to Niabh and lowering his voice*] Now for the racket, There's Conal and Laegaire and Cuchulain up as usual to claim it—[*with anticipation*] ah, they're drawing swords. Watch it, Niabh. It'll be a glorious fight.

Niabh [*turning away*]—Shame on you, Bricriu, to take delight in such things.

Bricriu.—I thought you liked that kind of thing, dear. Only just now you were scolding me for not being quarrelsome myself. [*Excited.*] Look! They're at it!

*The clash of steel is heard. Niabh at first hesitates, then gives way to curiosity, and joins Bricriu at the window. She is silent for a moment.*

Niabh.—O, Bricriu, stop them before it's too late. Look! there are the two of them both attacking Cuchulain.

Bricriu [*absorbed in the fight*].—Just like them. But it's no use my interfering.

Niabh.—I can't bear it. [*She leaves the window, and stands undecidedly in the middle of the room.*]

Bricriu.—That's a great fight! Good man, Cuchulain! [*Without looking round.*] You're missing it all, Niabh. Cuchulain's just given Laegaire a wipe on the helmet that'll make his head sing for a week. [*A crash is heard.*]

Niabh [*in terror*].—What's that?

Bricriu [*with affected indifference*].—Only a table smashed.

Niabh [*really indignant*].—What a shame! [*The sound of fighting suddenly stops.*] What's happened?

Bricriu [*in a tone of disappointment*].—Sencha's gone between them, and he's trying to patch up a truce.

Niabh.—Thank heaven. [*She sits on the couch at the other window.*]

Bricriu [*turning away from the window*].—You're no warrior's wife, Niabh. You did well to marry me.

Niabh.—Maybe so. Have they settled things up yet?

Bricriu [*looking back, regretfully*].—Yes.

Niabh.—What's the long face for, Bricriu? Isn't

it thankful you ought to be to have it settled before they've broken more furniture?

*Bricriu.*—The question isn't settled at all, as a matter of fact. It's only a truce. But you needn't think I invited them here for the pleasure of watching them eating. [*He takes a last look through the window.*] Ugh! [*He leaves the window and crosses over to his wife.*]

*Niabh.*—You're a queer sort of a host, Bricriu, and a queer sort of a man to be building palaces, when you don't seem to care what becomes of them.

*Bricriu* [*stiffly*].—My palaces are my own, dear, to do what I like with. Please change the subject.

*Niabh* [*tolerantly*].—Oh, very well. Your ruin be on your own head.

*Bricriu.*—The proper place for it. Did you think I wanted to transfer it to someone else's?

*Niabh* [*protesting*].—I did not.

*Bricriu.*—Then why say obvious things? [*He expects no answer to this, and turns away, thinking the matter finished.*]

*Niabh* [*hurt, but not tearful*].—You're very unkind, Bricriu.

*Bricriu* [*turning back again*].—Unkind? How am I unkind?

*Niabh.*—The way you snap at everything I say. It's no wonder you're called Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue.

*Bricriu.*—I'm not ashamed of the title. [*He strolls back to the window.*] But the people who gave it to me ought to be. [*He looks through the window at the banqueters below, contemptuously.*] It's little to their credit that they call common-sense bitterness.

*Niabh* [*quietly argumentative*].—But you do put what you call your common-sense very unkindly, Bricriu.

*Bricriu.*—It's only the fools and blockheads that take common-sense unkindly.

*Niabh* [*emphatically*].—Everybody takes it unkindly, Bricriu.

*Bricriu* [*unconcernedly, gazing through the window*].—That doesn't alter my opinion.

*Niabh* [*puzzled, after a short pause*].—What do you mean by that?

*Bricriu* [*turning impatiently from the window*].—What I said, of course.

*Niabh.*—Of course. [*Persistently.*] But what did you say?

*Bricriu.*—I said that all the people of Ulster were

fools. [*He comes aggressively into the centre of the room.*]

Niabh.—You didn't, Bricriu.

Bricriu.—I implied it, at any rate.

Niabh [*at last realising his meaning*].—O-o-o-h !

Bricriu.—You see it now ?

Niabh [*unheeding*].—It's that nasty way you have of implying things that makes you so unpopular. [*With emphatic protestation.*] Why need you be so bitter, Bricriu ?

Bricriu.—Could I be anything else with such people ?

Niabh.—Of course, you could. I don't see why you couldn't get on with them as well as anyone else. [*Reasonably.*] Everyone has his faults ; you have yours ; that needn't prevent people getting on all right together.

Bricriu.—That's the worst fault they have in my eyes—the way they accept one another.

Niabh [*not understanding, but feeling he has said something shocking*].—Bricriu ! How could you ? [*Resignedly*] Well, I see you're incorrigible. If you're unpopular, the blame, as I said before, is on yourself.

Bricriu.—To which statement my former reply would start this conversation all over again. But I refrain. I don't know how you feel after talking in a circle. But I feel a fool.

Niabh [*not heeding him, looking out of the window*].—Look, Bricriu, there's Laegaire's wife, Fedelm, that you admire so much, coming out of the women's palace on to the lawn. [*Bricriu comes over and looks out of the window.*] She certainly walks nicely, but I don't think she's really good looking. Do you, Bricriu ?

Bricriu [*not particularly interested*].—Oh, she's passable.

Niabh.—That's Conal's wife, Lendabair, coming out now. I think she's a horrid creature.— But, look ! Bricriu, Fedelm sees you. She's coming over here.

Bricriu [*waves his hand, and leans out of the window*].—Hail ! wife of Laegaire, the triumphant ; Fedelm of the Fresh Heart is no nickname for you. I'd think it but small honour for you if any of the women of Ulster should take precedence of you in entering the banquet hall. It's at your heel the women of Ulster should be. [*He waves a farewell.*]

Niabh.—It's a shame for you, Bricriu, to be talking like that when you don't mean it, and to be stirring up jealousy in a woman.

*Bricriu.*—Peace, for a moment. I want to speak to Lendabair. [*Leaning out of the window again.*] Hail ! Lendabair ; for you that is no nickname, the darling and pet of all mankind for your splendour and lustre. As Conal is above all the heroes of Ulster in valour and comeliness, so are you above the women, and it's at their head you should be when they are entering the banquet hall. [*To Niabh*].—She was gone before I'd finished speaking. Just look at the two of them trying to get first to the door without appearing to hurry. [*Niabh, all curiosity, leans out of the window.*] That's worth seeing, isn't it ? Now, watch me try the game on Emer. Here she comes. [*Louder, speaking to one below.*] Hail ! Emer, daughter of Forgall, wife of Cuchulain, the best warrior in Ireland. Emer of the Fair Hair is for you no nickname. Kings and princes have contended for you in jealous rivalry. As the sun surpasses the stars of heaven, so do you outshine the women of the world in youth and beauty and wisdom, and it's you that should be entering the banquetting hall first, before all the women of Ireland. [*Confidentially, bending lower.*] And you'd better hurry up, too, or the others will be there first. [*He turns to Niabh.*] She's off !

*Niabh.*—Bricriu, you've never said nice things like that to me [*not very seriously*].

*Bricriu.*—No, dear. But I generally meant anything I said to you. [*Turning to the window again.*] Look at them racing for it now ! Emer's given up all pretence at propriety, and started to run.

*Niabh.*—How shocking !

*Bricriu.*—Well, my dear, the others had the start of her. They've all got round the corner now. Come to the other window, and see the finish.

*Niabh* [*rather admiringly*].—You're a terrible man, Bricriu. (*She goes with him over to the banquet hall window.*) I wonder what's going to happen ?

*Bricriu.*—When those women and their attendant damsels get inside the hall there'll be a fine hubbub. They've all got husbands, too. [*A distant clatter of quarrelling female voices is heard. It increases rapidly in volume.*] By the gods of my people, if those quarrelling women come into the hall there'll be murder done among the men.

*Niabh.*—And whose fault will that be ?

*Bricriu* [*complacently*].—Mine, of course. But there, they won't get in. Sencha's given orders to close the

doors. [*A loud clang is heard below, and the clatter of voices suddenly becomes obscured.*]

Niabh.—Sencha has more sense than any man in Ulster.

Bricriu—Sencha's no sport.

Niabh—You won't be satisfied until there's blood shed.

Bricriu—I thought we'd agreed on that.

*Renewed babel below, and the sound of blows on wood. There is a stirring of feet in the hall, and the confused voices of men swell the clamour. Bricriu watches, in evident amusement, at the window. Niabh angrily leaves him and throws herself on the opposite couch.*

Niabh [*in the manner of one who feels she has tolerated folly too long*—Perhaps you're satisfied now, Bricriu. You failed to start a war of steel among the men, but it may be some compensation to have started a war of words among the women. [*A loud smashing noise is heard above the uproar below.*] What's that? [*She jumps up from the couch.*]

Bricriu—It's only Conal and Laegaire trying to break holes in the wall so as to let their wives in. I do think that's going rather far.

Niabh [*running over to him, and looking out on the hall*—But look at Cuchalain, Bricriu. He's lifting the whole wall up from its foundations to let Emer in. [*In mingled dismay and admiration*] O, hasn't he the mighty strength.

Bricriu [*angrily*—Hasn't he the mighty cheek!

*The walls of the room begin to creak and tremble. As Bricriu and his wife withdraw apprehensively into the centre of the room, the walls list over bodily to the right and come to rest in that position. Fresh uproar below.*

Niabh—The whole house is falling. [*She clings to her husband in terror.*]

Bricriu [*shaking her off, and rushing to the window, shouts down into the banquet hall*—Cuchulain! Cuchulain! What have you done? O, King of the heroes of Erin, what have you done with my house? [*To Niabh*] He won't listen. And here comes Emer through the broken wall, and her fifty damsels along with her. [*Through the window, imploringly*] Cuchulain, Cuchulain, you must use your mighty strength to put my house right again as you found it. Cuchulain!

*Fergus Mac Roigh enters. He is a powerful, majestic man, armed, but without spear or shield.*

*Fergus*—You have brought your troubles on yourself, Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue. Why should the great Cuchulain redress them?

*Bricriu*—Ho! Valiant Fergus! bravest of the ex-kings of Ireland, is it you? [*Comes up to him with mock courtesy.*]

*Fergus*—Yes, it is I, and in no mood for your taunts, Bricriu. Why have you set our people fighting again?

*Bricriu* [*innocently surprised*—I? Why, I haven't been near them. [*To Niabh*] Have I, dear?

*Fergus* [*with heavy and growing anger*—You have carried out your threat, Bricriu, even though we came as your guests. You have stirred up our heroes one against the other, and you have set the women of Ulster at variance. [*Fiercely, on seeing Bricriu's satisfaction*] We have given you material for laughter too long, and too long have you escaped violence at our hands. [*More calmly*] But you shall not escape now. I'll have my revenge for the scorn you have cast on me, you warrior in words.

*Niabh* [*recovering from her first astonishment*—These are strange words to use to your host, Fergus, and strange charges to make. [*She faces him.*]

*Fergus*—Stand aside, woman. I would not use violence on you. My quarrel is with your husband.

*Niabh*—I will not stand aside. [*Furiously*] How dare you speak to me like that.

*Bricriu* [*mildly intervening*—Niabh, don't interfere with the gentleman. It's his honour makes him behave this way. He can't help it. [*He leads her to the couch on the left, and she sits there submissively*] That's right, dear. Never mind. Now, Fergus. [*Fergus is now feeling rather foolish, and makes no move.*] I'm ready when you are. Satire, of course, has its penalties as well as its glories, and it's only fair I should taste of both. But what a fine satirist I must be to have earned death at the mighty hands of Fergus. [*Sneeringly*] I'm afraid they can't put this noble exploit of yours into poetry, because I'll make no resistance. The only part of this scene worth chronicling will be my last words. [*To Niabh*] Take a note of them, dear.

*Niabh* [*sobbing*—O, Bricriu!

*Fergus* [*anxious to get the thing over*—You shall have no heroic punishment. See, I discard my sword, lest I be tempted to use it on you.

*He draws his sword from the scabbard, and lays it on the right-hand couch. He then advances on Bricriu, who*

does not move. Fergus, hearing steps, pauses. Cuchulain, Conal, and Laegaire appear at the central entrance behind Fergus. Laegaire is middle aged, with yellow hair turning to brown. Conal is younger, fair haired, and of ruddy complexion. Cuchulain, though of powerful build, is barely out of his teens, and is not yet fully developed. He is dark-haired, with black eyebrows, but fair-skinned. The three are fully armed, and carry their swords in their hands. Other warriors are seen behind them, who do not enter. The three pass Fergus by and go up to Bricriu.

Laegaire, Conal, and Cuchulain [*in one voice*—Which of us is to have your Champion's Portion, Bricriu?

Fergus [*coming forward*—Yes. Pass judgment for your pitiful portion, Bricriu.

Bricriu—The Champion's Portion of my house is for the bravest and best of the men of Ulster.

Laegaire—But you said I was to have it, Bricriu.

Conal [*To Laegaire*—Well you see, you're disqualified now. [*To Bricriu*] Bricriu, you said I was the man, and I was to have it. Don't you remember?

Cuchulain [*calmly*—Bricriu and Conal, and all the men of Ulster know that if it is to go to anyone it is to me it should go.

Bricriu [*dispassionately*—The Champion's Portion is for him who is admitted to be the best man in Ulster.

Fergus—But every man in Ulster says he's the bravest man in it.

Bricriu—Well, they ought to know, I suppose.

Fergus [*firmly*—We want this question settled now. Which of these three is to have your Champion's Portion?

Bricriu—Really, Fergus, I do not feel equal to making a decision. [*To the heroes*] It stands to reason, since you three are standing here now, that you have either killed every enemy you met, or ran away from the formidable ones. I don't know the facts, so a decision is impossible. [*He turns away and goes over to the right.*]

Laegaire [*coming after him*—Then who is to have the Portion?

Conal [*also crossing over, followed by Cuchulain*—Yes, Bricriu, that must be decided here and now.

Bricriu—The Champion's portion of my house is worthy of a special test.

Fergus [*impatently*—Spinner of Bitter Words, we

are tired of you and of your tests. The Portion must be awarded at once.

*Cuchulain*—No, Fergus. Let us have the test, and settle this question once and for all as to who is Champion of Ulster, for the quarrels it causes among our wives are beyond enduring.

*Bricriu*—Are you all agreed on that ?

*Conal*—I am for one.

*Laegaire*—And I.

*Bricriu*—Very well, then. Let you all go to Curoi MacDaire, and he will set you a suitable test.

*Laegaire*—No. We'll have none of your supernatural tests, Bricriu. Everyone knows that Cuchulain is bound to win them, because he's related to the Sidhe. It isn't fair.

*Conal*—Quite right, Laegaire. We'll stand any test in reason, but that's not fair.

*Cuchulain*—The harder a test the fairer it is.

*Laegaire*—I'll face any test against mortal things, but I cannot stand the uncanny, and I'm not ashamed of it. I don't care who knows it.

*Conal*—We're soldiers, not druids.

*Cuchulain*—There you are, Bricriu. The Championship is mine. They both confess that they're afraid of ghosts.

*Conal and Laegaire [together]*—Who calls us cowards?

*They attack Cuchulain. Cuchulain puts up his shield and backs towards the entrance. Niabh screams, and runs from the room. The heroes go on fighting. Fergus turns on Bricriu.*

*Fergus [exasperated]*—You have set them at it again, Bricriu. There'll be no peace while you are here.

*He rushes at Bricriu, seizes him by the shoulders, and hurls him through the window. He then picks up his sword, and beats down those of the contending heroes in the endeavour to separate them. It is a hard task.*



## ACT II.

*The throne room of the palace of Cruachan is a magnificent apartment. It would require an antiquarian to describe it properly. The dramatic essentials are two thrones on a dais at the back, with two entries on opposite sides of the dais.*

*Maeve, Queen of Connacht, fairest of the women of Ireland, is gazing out of a window to the left of the dais, looking very bored. Ailill, her husband, is sitting at a table in the centre of the room, working out a chess problem. He is a decent, intellectual, nervous little fellow.*

*Maeve.*—Rain ! Rain ! Rain ! Will it ever stop ?

*Ailill.*—Grumbling won't stop it, anyway. Come and have a game. I'm tired of these problems.

*Maeve.*—Chess ! Poch ! I, who have led armies to the fight—am I to turn to mimic battles with toys of ivory ?

*Ailill.*—Chess is not to be despised, my dear. It has all the excitement of warfare without any of its inconveniences.

*Maeve* [*scornfully*].—Such as getting killed or wounded.

*Ailill.*—Oh, dear no. Those are minor objections. I referred to the inconvenience of doing without your bath, and putting up with irregular meals. However, we won't argue over that again, for we're both tired of it. You were complaining of boredom just now ?

*Maeve.*—Oh, no, I wasn't complaining.

*Ailill.*—Well, you are bored, anyhow. Would you care to take a bit of a raid into Leinster ?

*Maeve.*—No, thanks.

*Ailill.*—Would you care to see Maine Mathremail and Maine Athremail fence ?

*Maeve.*—No, I wouldn't.

*Ailill.*—Would you like the Chief Bard to play you a tune ?

*Maeve.*—No.

*Ailill* [*nervously*].—You wouldn't like me to make love to you, by any chance, would you ?

*Maeve.*—I should just think not.

*Ailill.*—You rather liked it once. Well, I don't

know what to do for you. Why couldn't you just sit still and rest yourself like other people? Why are you always wanting to do something? I'm not that way, at all. All I ever want is to be let alone, and it's not often I get my wish.

*Maeve.*—It wouldn't be good for you if you did.

*Ailill.*—That's what you always say, and it's no consolation. I didn't marry you for my good.

*Maeve.*—You didn't marry me at all, dear. I married you.

*Ailill.*—I daresay. I often wonder why you did.

*Maeve.*—And you'll go on wondering.

*Ailill.*—You see, we're not really very compatible, we two. Somebody rather quiet and domestic would have suited me best—Niabh, Bricriu's wife, maybe. Why, if you hadn't come along and swept me away, I believe I'd have asked her. And, you know, Maeve, Bricriu himself would have been the right match for you. That reminds me, we have to pronounce judgment on those three heroes this morning. That should be something worth doing. So, cheer up! I'll send for them at once. They ought to be awake now, even though their sleep was somewhat—shall we say—disturbed. Then we have those poets to judge too. Why, we'll have quite an exciting day, after all.

*Maeve.*—Exciting! Where's the excitement in listening to three foolish poets reciting, and three silly soldiers bragging? Let's get rid of them quickly before lunch time, and have a raid into Leinster in the afternoon.

*Ailill.*—Thank heaven you've settled on something at last.

*A servant enters from the left.*

*Servant.*—O Queen, Bricriu, the Lord of Dun Rudraige, is at the gate, and begs an audience.

*Maeve.*—Make him welcome, and, when you have attended to his comfort, bring him before us.

*The servant bows and goes out.*

*Ailill.*—This is terrible. What on earth can Bricriu want? Those three champions are worry enough without having the storm centre of Ulster descending on us too.

*Maeve.*—What have we to fear from him—we, of Connacht? Probably he's a little anxious to know who has won the test, and so comes over to see.

*Ailill.*—Still I fear him. He upsets everything wherever he goes, if he gets half a chance. He will

turn our artistic palace of Cruachan into a brawling tavern like the Red Branch if he once gets among our people.

*Maeve.*—I sometimes wish we had some of the Red Branch spirit in Connacht. Our Connacht heroes seem to have nothing to do but get fat on our hard-won glories.

*Ailill.*—Which is very fortunate for you, Maeve. Do you think you could dominate Ulster as you dominate Connacht?

*Maeve.*—Perhaps you're right. But if you really think Bricriu will do all this it is all the more necessary to entertain him and so distract his thoughts. As a matter of fact, I think Bricriu is harmless enough by himself. It's his wife makes him what he is. When he's alone I don't fear him.

*Ailill.*—It is when men fear him least or have taken the greatest precautions against him that he is most dangerous. At that feast of his at Dun Rudraige, though they had taken hostages of him and kept him out of the banquet hall, he had the heroes of Ulster fighting and the women wrangling before they had been an hour in the house. By the gods of my people! I see an end to the peace of our home and the prosperity of our kingdom from the moment he sets foot among us.

*Maeve.*—Say no more for the present. Here he comes.

*Bricriu is ushered in by the attendants, who then withdraw.*

*Maeve.*—Welcome, Bricriu, to Cruachan. Connacht has not seen you these many months.

*Bricriu.*—The pleasure is all the greater now, I'm sure.

*Ailill.*—Yes, we are delighted to see you. And how is the lady Niabh?

*Bricriu.*—Querulous as usual, Ailill. She says she's sorry she ever married me, and I really begin to think she's right. I must say, though, Maeve, I hardly expected so warm a welcome after all the trouble I must have caused you by sending you those champions for judgment. You certainly do look worried, Ailill.

*Ailill.*—It's not the trouble we mind so much as the extremely delicate nature of the business. These Ulster heroes have very hasty tempers, and it never seems to occur to them to abide by the umpire's decision.

*Bricriu.*—That's the difficulty I had with them myself, or I shouldn't have sent them on to you. I asked Curoi MacDaire to test them, and he arranged with a giant to meet each of them separately on the way back to Emain. Conal and Laegaire both ran away, but Cuchulain beat the giant and came home in triumph.— By the way, Curoi had to pay the giant rather heavy compensation for the damage he suffered. Of course I awarded Cuchulain the Championship, but the others said that supernatural tests weren't fair, so I told them to come to you.

*Maeve.*—Such a lot of fuss about nothing. What is this champion's portion, anyhow ?

*Bricriu.*—The Champion's Portion of my house is not the portion of a fool's house. There's a cauldron of wine enough for three heroes of Ulster in it ; there's a seven year old boar in it, and a seven year old bull, that have eaten nothing but sweet milk and fine meal and herbs since they were born. Then there's a hundred cakes of wheat cooked in honey ; twenty-five bushels of wheat went to the making of them. That's the Champion's Portion of my house, and it would be just as well to decide on the winner of it quickly, for already the cakes are getting stale, and I can't afford to keep on feeding those animals on milk and fine meal for ever.

*Maeve.*—Well, we have tested them this very night, and I hope they'll be satisfied. We sent a magic cat to each of their bedrooms, and I think it's about time we sent someone to find out how they got on.

*She rings a gong and a servant enters.*

*Maeve.*—Go to the chamber of the three heroes of the Red Branch, and tell them that it is time to rise. But before doing so, observe them by stealth, and let me know in what condition you find them.

*Servant.*—It shall be done, madam. [*He bows, and exits.*]

*Maeve.*—And now, Bricriu, as we are helping you in this matter, perhaps you would be so kind as to assist us in another judgment ?

*Bricriu.*—Certainly. With pleasure.

*Maeve.*—We are versatile rulers, Ailill and I. Wars and conquests do not occupy all our time, and we have fostered learning and art throughout our Empire.

*Ailill.*—That is to say, Bricriu, when Maeve isn't dragging me off to battle in her war chariot, I some-

times manage to have a quiet artistic at-home here, and Maeve pretends to enjoy it.

*Maeve* [*remonstratingly*—Oh, Ailill, I'm as fond of the arts as you are, only I'm not taken in by them, and I don't give poets an extravagantly high place in my estimation. After all, what are poets but warriors without strength? Just as warriors are merely poets without brains.

*Bricriu* [*politely rebuking her for plagiarising*—A favourite saying of mine, great Queen. But what is it you want me to do?

*Ailill*—Well, you see, as we have some reputation as patrons of art, poets come here frequently to contest before us. At this very moment three well-known poets from Leinster, Munster, and Connacht, are waiting for an audience.

*Bricriu*—What a coincidence! That's more of my work. I published a little bit of satire recently in which I said that Munster produced worse poetry than Leinster, and Leinster worse than Connacht. Hence probably this trial of skill, though I hardly expected they could be stirred up so readily.

*Ailill*—Your fondness for stirring things up is rather uncanny. Still, as you are responsible for the competition, you would be the fittest person to judge it. Will you help us?

*Maeve*—Yes, do, Bricriu. We couldn't get on without your help, because I can never understand their poetry, and Ailill always understands it wrong.

*Ailill* [*huffed*—Everyone has a right to his own interpretation of any poem. [*Sententiously*] The number of possible interpretations is the measure of the excellence of the poem.

*Maeve*—The three poets who are coming to-day belong to three well-known schools. The Munster school's motto is "O 'tis love, 'tis love that makes the world go round." The Leinster school says "If you cannot understand, blame yourself, not the poet," while the poets of our own imperial Connacht say "We are unintelligible, therefore we are inspired."

*Bricriu*—An interesting trio. Far more interesting than the heroes, I should say. Let's have them in.

*Ailill rings the gong. Another servant enters.*

*Ailill*—Bring our Chief Bard and the three poets before us.

*Servant bows and goes out.*

*Ailill*—You must not let what Maeve has just said

prejudice you against any of them, Bricriu. Maeve is a great warrior, and has never cultivated her artistic soul, and so finds poetry hard to understand. With me it is different. I can sit and listen to poetry with a soul entranced by the magic music of words.

*Bricriu*—I understand. I suppose that is the standpoint from which we should judge them.

*Ailill* [*unconscious of irony*].—Yes. It is the only stand-point.

*Bricriu*—I see that you have competitors from every province except Ulster.

*Ailill*—There are no true poets in Ulster, only writers of war songs, or satirists like yourself, Bricriu. We had one of your poems recited here one evening—it was called “Beautiful Ireland,” I believe—and the people could hardly be kept from assaulting the reciter.

*Maeve* [*severely*].—Satire will not be tolerated South of the Boyne. A satirist once arose in Leinster and they said he was unpatriotic and cast him into the Liffey. [*Majestically*] We hang satirists in Connacht.

*Bricriu* [*politely bowing*].—Your Empire is undoubtedly run on most efficient lines, great queen.

*The Chief Bard of Connacht, an old man with flowing white beard, enters by the left-hand door. He is followed by three young poets. Ailill and Maeve seat themselves on their thrones. Bricriu stands at Maeve's right hand. The four poets approach the foot of the dais and pause.*

*Maeve*—Bricriu, here is our Chief Bard. [*Bricriu and the bard bow to each other coldly.*] We have asked the learned Bricriu of Dun Rudraige, himself a poet, to assist in our judgment to-day. [*To the poets, who do not appear to welcome the idea.*] You don't seem to approve of this.

*The Leinster Poet*—If your Majesty had read Bricriu's latest treatise on Irish Poetry you would understand our objection. [*Bricriu grins.*]

*Maeve*—I have read it. A most penetrating study it is, too.

*Leinster Poet*—Then, if your majesty is satisfied of his fitness to judge we must only submit.

*Chief Bard*—Very well. Let the contest begin.

*The Munster Poet, a handsome young man with flowing hair, dressed rather effeminately, steps forward unrolling a scroll.*

*Munster Poet*—The poem which I am about to submit to your judgment is entitled “Murmurings”

and is taken from my book "Rustling Rushes."  
 [*He recites with studied rapture*] —

O Love! thy Heart  
 Is the greater part  
 Of my throbbing Art,  
 Of my minstrelsy,

Thou sad sweet gleam  
 In the purple dream,  
 In the sombre stream  
 That is life for me. [*He bows.*]

*Chief Bard*—That is, I think, one of the tenderest love songs that has ever been written. Your majesty may have observed the careful choice of noun and epithet which so distinguishes this young writer.

*Ailill*—The poem is certainly full of remarkable depth and feeling.

*Maeve [to the bard]*—What you say about nouns and adjectives is about right. The poem seems to contain nothing else.

*Bricriu*—Ailill, don't tell me you're impressed by that drivel. Why, you yourself could attach colours to dreams and gleams and things and then set them riming.

*Chief Bard*—Your Majesty, I protest against this. We are here to judge poetry not to listen to ignorant Philistinism.

*Maeve [sternly]*—Bricriu has given his opinion, which was what I asked him to do. Let the next competitor come forward.

*The Leinster Poet, a thin-faced, wild-eyed, fanatical young man, with short wispy hair and untidy clothes, steps forward.*

*Leinster Poet*—My poem is entitled "The Spear" and is taken from my recent book "The Battle Brand of Leinster." [*He recites with great enthusiasm and an attempt to impart mystery to a reedy voice*] —

O Flashing Flame of Fire !  
 O Whisk of Whirling Light !  
 O Silver Streak dark bright !  
 My bitter sweet Desire !

Wild roars the Northern Wave,  
 And the sweet Wind of South  
 Lispering o'er lance-pierced Louth  
 Breathes on the ear of the Brave.

The Witches shriek in the Valley ;  
 The War God hasteneth ;  
 Dealer of dusky Death  
 Why dost thou dally ?

Lords of the Eastern Land,  
 Was it right to bereave us  
 Lest thy longing should leave us,  
 O Wand for the Warrior's Hand !

But thou shalt return, O Straight,  
 O Sharp ! O Bright ! O Strong !  
 Thro' thunder our purple throng  
 For thy flickering fire shall wait.

And sevenfold shall we grow  
 Our strength shall be seven time seven ;  
 And the sound shall horrify Heaven  
 Of the sevenfold groan of the foe.

*The Chief Bard* [after an ecstatic silence on the part of the Poet] : Do you not mark, O King, the mystic force and power in those lines ?

*Ailill*.—Yes. There is indeed great depth and mystery here.

*Maeve*.—Well, I always considered myself a fairly intelligent woman, but I must confess I can't make out what that poem was all about.

*Bricriu*.—If you were an ordinary woman instead of a queen, the poet would scathingly reply "Blame yourself, not me." [Turning patronisingly to the poet.] Are you the young man who led the last revolt of Leinster against the Borumha Tribute ?

*Leinster Poet*.—[Proudly holding up his head].—I am.

*Maeve*.—He has since been pardoned for that in consideration of his great intellectual attainments. Of course Ailill was responsible for this, because I never thought much of them.—What does that poem mean, young man ?

*Leinster Poet*.—My poems cannot be explained in terms of prose. My inspiration is in song.

*Bricriu*.—The usual answer. Console yourself, Maeve, at not finding a meaning in the song. The poet says there isn't one.

*Leinster Poet* [angrily].—I said nothing of the sort. I said the meaning couldn't be explained.

*Bricriu* [as if deeply impressed].—Ah ! I see.



*Maeve*.—Well, so long as there's no sedition meant, I don't care what it means.

*Bricriu* [*brusquely*].—Well, my boy, if you'll take my advice you'll start no more revolutions. [*Slaps the poet genially on the back.*] Stick to your poetry and you can't do much harm. [*The poet turns away with hauteur.*] Next candidate, please.

*The Connacht Poet advances. He is a very commonplace little man, and recites in a sing-song voice, laying great stress on his internal rhymes.*

*The Connacht Poet :*

The Sapphire Portal opens wide ;  
He stands inside, the ruddy hawk ;  
I watch him walk in regal pride ;  
O, can I bide, my fate to balk ?

But I have known the stars to sing,  
And downward fling their radiance,  
And glint and glance on stream and spring,  
Or on the shingle gaily dance.

And shall I, then, whose hard-wrought soul  
Has heard the toll, the mystic knell,  
Strike and rebel against the whole  
Upon time's shoal, and baffle Hell ?

For Death is beaten to his knees,  
And Darkness flees before the Light.  
And thro' the night my spirit sees  
The Tyrannies of Time in flight.

[*Smiles and bows.*]

*Bricriu*.—What's the name of that poem ?

*Connacht Poet*.—I have hesitated a long time between "Memorabilia" and "The Master of Mystery."

*Maeve*.—Why should you call it either of those titles ?

*Ailill* [*suddenly wakened from the dream into which the poem had lulled him*].—O, Maeve, how prosaic you are.

*Connacht Poet*.—Surely the poem explains the title ?

*Maeve*.—I couldn't follow the poem.

*Chief Bard* [*very self-satisfied*].—It is pure mysticism.

*Connacht Poet*.—Your majesty will understand that the choosing of a suitable title is a matter requiring care and consideration. I had not yet fixed on either

of the two I mentioned. In fact, I hardly know what to call it.

*Bricriu* [*impatiently*].—O, why not call it after the first line and have done with it?

*Chief Bard* [*lifting his eyebrows*].—The Lord of Dun Rudraige is sarcastic. Perhaps he would like to compete himself.

*Bricriu* [*with alacrity*].—Indeed, I don't see why Ulster doesn't show a bit of her quality. I'll compete.

*Ailill*.—But, Bricriu, you are one of the judges.

*Maeve*.—We can safely leave the whole judgment to you. You have seen that Bricriu doesn't think much of any of the poems.

*Chief Bard* [*scornfully*].—Let us hear the great Ulster poet.

*Bricriu* [*to the Bard*].—Thank you. [*To Ailill and Maeve.*] I shall recite to you a little extempore poem I composed in my head while the competition was going on. [*To the poets.*] You will excuse me if it is somewhat reminiscent. It is called "The Mastery of Mystery." [*The Connacht Poet winces. Bricriu recites.*]

If I should settle on Rose and Nettle,  
On Stone and Metal a meaning new,  
And you not know it, I'd be a poet,  
Which means a deeper man than you.

With pen so nimble, I'd make a symbol  
Of star or thimble or sword or sheep,  
And fix these phrases in wordy mazes  
And call them poems of meaning deep.

A startling title of course is vital,  
And the reader's sight'll at once be caught  
If I call my pallid and bloodless ballad—  
"The Flaming Throat of the Hound of Thought."

The number seven adds mystic leaven  
And rimes with Heaven, so I'd use it much;  
And I'd keep up tension by frequent mention  
Of Hell (well-capitalled) as a lurid touch.

To sing of sparrows, the vision narrows;  
No soul it harrows to mention these;  
So I'll tune my cittern to the cry of the bittern  
Or the curlew's call on the bogland breeze.

My soul's afflictions and other fictions,  
 With contradictions I'd furbish up ;  
 My lack of meaning securely screening  
 With "ice-cold fire" or "sour-sweet cup."

And Love's great passion my pulse would lash on  
 In different fashion from other folk.  
 My thoughts erotic, in words exotic,  
 And mystic mumming I'd mask and cloak.

My cogitations, with antiquations  
 And alliteration's aid I'd crown ;  
 With mid-line riming and verbal chiming  
 And compound adjective and proper noun.

And then, should I sing of scenes surprising ;  
 Of suns arising at unlikely hours ;  
 Of planets dancing and mountains prancing  
 And strange performances by trees and flowers ;

Of curious creatures with new-found features  
 (Green dove, pink eagle, or three-horned hind) ;  
 You shouldn't grumble, but just feel humble  
 Before the deepness of the poet's mind.

And if mysticism should show a schism  
 Or deep abysm 'twixt sense and sound,  
 Fall down adoring the poet soaring  
 Above the sense as above the ground.

*The Connacht Poet* [*angry and spluttering*].—Such blasphemous indecency !

*The Leinster Poet* [*raging, but trying to be calm*].—'This is the merest vapouring of a distorted mind.

*The Munster Poet* [*turning remonstratingly to Ailill*].—I am surprised your majesty could listen to such profanity.

*Chief Bard* [*still with cold disdain*].—For myself, I think it poor stuff, even as satire.

*Ailill* [*puzzled, and trying to be judicious*].—I'm not so sure, now—not so sure at all. The timing is excellent ; so is the metre ; there are some rather good images, and I am fairly clear as to the general trend of the poem ; in fact—I may say I rather like it.

*Connacht Poet* [*shocked*].—Your majesty !

*Maeve*—I could understand what it was all about, anyhow. I think Briciu should get the prize.

*Munster Poet*—Oh, hor:or !

*Chief Bard*—Your Majesty, I protest. This is a vulgar and ignorant squib, unworthy of the name of poetry.

*Ailill* [*anxious to pacify everyone*—While not going to the extreme of censure used by our Chief Bard, I nevertheless feel that Bricriu's poem, clever as it is, should not be allowed to compete with the three serious poems, still less to win the prize.

*Maeve*—But it's the only poem we understood. Wasn't it, Ailill? Be honest.

*Ailill*—But it isn't poetry.

*Maeve*—Are the others poetry?

*Ailill*—Yes.

*Maeve*—How do you know if you didn't understand them?

*Ailill*—It's because I don't properly understand them that I know them to be poetry. They gave me that vague dreamy uplifted feeling, that consciousness that there must be some sort of a meaning somewhere, that I always get when I listen to poetry.

*Connacht Poet*—Your Majesty is right, and, rather than have the noble art of poetry associated even for a moment with the effusions of that scribbler there, I shall withdraw from the competition.

*Leinster Poet*—I say the same. Ribald attempts at satire such as we have heard cannot be mentioned in the same breath as poetry.

*Munster Poet*—Poetry should be sweet and tender as love itself. It is no fit quiver for the cruel shafts of satire. I also shall withdraw unless Bricriu does.

*Bricriu* [*suavely*—I have no desire to embarrass you in your decision, Ailill, so I withdraw my poem.

*Chief Bard* [*smarting under these coals of fire*—It is well that you have some sense of shame.

*Maeve*—That is an ungracious reply. Bricriu, I am sorry you are withdrawing, but I honour you for it. The prize is only a wreath anyway.

*Bricriu*—Watching the Chief Bard's face was sufficient reward for my poem. [*The Bard glares, but has no answer ready.*]

*Ailill*—Let the competitors now retire, and when we have deliberated and formed our judgment we shall communicate it to them. [*The Bard and the three poets bow and go out.*] Well, Bricriu, who do you think should get the prize?

*Bricriu*—O, if you're bent on giving a prize to rub-bish, give them each one. Then you won't commit

yourself. . . . But, to turn to more serious affairs, what about the three heroes upstairs?

*Maeve*—I'd almost forgotten them. [*She rings the gong*] I myself feel confident of the result.

*The servant returns.*

*Maeve*—What news of the Champions of Ulster?

*Servant*—Peeping, great queen, according to instructions, through the keyholes of the three candles of the Gael, the mighty warriors of Ulster, I saw there what I shall truly relate. Laegaire the Triumphant, the hot hammer of Meath, I saw in his night shirt astride the rafters of the room, while his weapons lay all in disorder over the floor. In like manner I found Conal the Victorious, the bright torch of Ulster, save that he had had time to slip on a dressing gown before ascending.

*Bricriu*—What is it that you said you loosed on them, Maeve?

*Maeve*—Magic cats.

*Bricriu*—What are they like?

*Maeve*—Just like ordinary cats faked a bit with phosphorous and belladonna. [*Turns to servant*] How did you find Cuchulain?

*Servant*—Cuchulain's room I found all in confusion as after a struggle, and Cuchulain himself asleep, and he with his back to the wall, kneeling on one knee, with his head resting on his arm, and his hands on his spear, and his sword on the ground beside him.

*Maeve*—Is not that trial sufficient?

*Bricriu*—Well, I'd have admired him more if he'd offered the unfortunate cat some milk. But he's a brave lad. [*To the servant*] I suppose the cat escaped?

*Servant*—Yes, my lord.

*Bricriu*—Well, that's all right. [*To Maeve*] I'd better be off now for Dun Rudraige.

*Ailill*—What? So soon?

*Bricriu*—Yes. My wife is always very anxious if I'm away long. She always thinks I've got myself into trouble. She's generally right, too.

*Ailill*—But what about the judgment?

*Bricriu*—Do you mean to say you're not convinced?

*Maeve*—Of course he is. The portion must obviously go to Cuchulain, Ailill.

*Ailill*—I know, dear. But how are we going to break it to the others? That's what's troubling me.

*Maeve*—We'll call them together and tell them straight, of course.

*Ailill*—And do you think they'll take it lying down? They've each got a whole army of retainers in camp in our grounds.

*Maeve*—That certainly makes it awkward, but we could mobilise our own troops.

*Ailill*—Not at such short notice.

*Maeve*—Coward! Must I then declare judgment myself?

*Ailill*—I wish to heaven I'd never touched this business. Bricriu, what shall I do?

*Bricriu*—I'm very sorry for you, but you should have insisted on their coming unattended.

*Ailill*—Yes, yes, I know. But what are we to do now?

*Bricriu*—It is not for me to advise the great and wise rulers of Connacht on a point of judgment. My own opinion is simply this, and let the queen mark it. There need be no difficulty in forming a judgment, and no necessity to pronounce it, for Laegaire is as unlike Conal as bronze is unlike silver, and Conal is as unlike Cuchulain as silver is unlike gold . . . . Chew upon that, Maeve. . . . And now I really must go, or my wife will be in terror about me. Good-bye.

*Maeve* [*a little offended by his lack of ceremony*—Good-bye.

*Ailill* [*somewhat relieved*—Good-bye.

*Bricriu* bows, and is escorted out by the servant.

*Ailill*—That advice of his doesn't seem to me to make things any easier.

*Maeve*—It does to me. Did you see what he was looking at while he spoke?

*Ailill*—No.

*Maeve*—Then you missed the clue. [*She leaves her throne and goes over to a sideboard standing at the right-hand wall. It is laden with gold and silver vessels, cups, candlesticks, etc.*] Do you see these three cups? They're the solution to our difficulties. [*She rings the gong.*]

*Ailill*—I don't see it.

*Maeve*—Be patient, and you shall in a minute. [*She turns to the servant who has entered*] Go to Laegaire the Triumphant, and request him to come to me here. [*The servant bows and exit.*]

*Ailill*—Maeve, I am completely in the dark, so I retire from this affair altogether and leave it entirely in your hands.

*Maeve*—As you please. Let us now assume our full state. [*She takes a bronze cup from the sideboard and goes back to her throne.*] Now, if you'll hold this [*putting the cup in Ailill's hand*] till it's wanted, I'll do the rest. [*She sits down.*]

*Ailill*—O, if that's all I have to do, I don't mind. [*He holds the cup on his knee.*]

*Maeve*—That's right. [*Listens*] I hear him coming. Sit up straight now. Look majestic.

*Ailill* is conforming to her directions when *Laegaire* is ushered in by the servant through the right-hand door, who then retires.

*Laegaire* [*serenely inquiring*].—You summoned me, Queen *Maeve*?

*Maeve*.—Welcome, *Laegaire*! Did you sleep well?

*Laegaire*.—Well, indeed, O Queen, considering everything.

*Maeve*.—What? Were you disturbed?

*Laegaire*.—Indeed, I was. A monstrous, cat-like creature, with flaming body, and enormous flashing eyes, came to my chamber in the night. Otherwise I was undisturbed.

*Maeve*.—That was sent to test your worthiness of the Champion's Portion.

*Laegaire*.—Then it wasn't fair. I have already protested against these supernatural tests.

*Maeve*.—Why protest, *Laegaire*, when you came through the ordeal so well? Indeed, you acted as I expected you would, and to you I award the Champion's Portion. [*Laegaire tries not to look surprised.*] As a token of this, take this cup of bronze chased with silver. [*She takes the cup from Ailill and gives it to Laegaire, who receives it with a bow.*] Let no one see it till you get to *Emain*, and when the Portion is exhibited to be claimed by the Champion, then bring forth this cup as a sign that it is yours; and may you enjoy the glory of it for ever.

*Laegaire* [*solemnly*].—Great Queen! may I prove before long that your judgment is right.

*Maeve*.—You will, surely, *Laegaire*. Let me fill your cup with good red wine to cheer you on your way. [*She goes to the sideboard and fills his cup from a jar she gets there.*]

*Laegaire*.—Thank you. [*He drains the cup at a draught.*] And now, farewell!

*Maeve*.—Farewell, brave *Laegaire*.

*Laegaire*.—Farewell, *Ailill*.

*Ailill* [*suddenly aroused*].—Oh, good-bye, old man.  
*Laegaire* goes out to the left. *Maeve* taps the gong.  
*The servant re-enters from the right.*

*Maeve*.—Now, go and ask Conal, the Victorious, to favour us with his presence. [*Servant retires.*]

*Ailill*.—I begin to see daylight now.

*Maeve*. [*Taking a silver cup, and handing it to Ailill.*].—I think you might help me out a bit in the speeches. Think of poor me having to repeat all that nonsense over again. [*She sits down again on her throne.*]

*Ailill*.—It's no use, dear. I'd have to smile. Besides, you're managing it all splendidly.

*Maeve*.—Of course. I always do. But it's tiresome, all the same. However, I suppose there's no help for it. I hear him coming now. Don't grin.

*Conal enters from the right.*

*Conal*.—You called me, Great Queen, and here I am.

*Maeve*.—Welcome, O Conal, the Victorious! Have you had a good night's rest?

*Conal*.—Passable, thank you.

*Maeve*.—The servant who called you gave me the impression that you were not too comfortable.

*Conal*.—O—er—well—the fact is—I was wakened in the small hours by a noise at my door, and, thinking it might be the maid coming with the hot water, and not liking to be seen—my hair gets very untidy in bed, you know—I just—I just—[*he pauses, at a loss.*].—

*Maeve* [*sympathetically*].—Climbed up to the rafters to hide it? I understand.

*Conal*.—As a matter of fact, it turned out to be a sort of magic cat, and I was just coming down to—to finish it off, you know, when it vanished.

*Maeve*.—And you stayed where you were the rest of the night?

*Conal*.—Well—yes.

*Ailill*.—You were too lazy to come down, I suppose?

*Conal*.—Yes, that was it. Besides, nobody could be expected to go back to a bed that a cat had been worrying at—could they?

*Maeve*.—Of course, not. The rafters would be much more comfortable.

*Conal*'—Yes. [*With sudden vehemence.*] But I swear by the gods my people swear by, that if any Man had taken such liberties with my bed, it's not long I'd be holding my hand off him.

*Maeve*.—Of course magic cats are different.

*Conal*.—Of course.



*Maeve.*—Well, I sent for you because Ailill and I have awarded the Championship of Ulster to you.

*Conal* [*modestly*].—To me?

*Maeve.*—Yes, to you. [*She takes the cup from Ailill.*] As a token whereof take this cup of silver chased with gold. [*She gives it to him.*] Let no one see it till you come to Emain, and, when the Portion is exhibited to be claimed by the Champion, then bring it forth as a sign. For the portion is yours, and long may you live to enjoy it.

*Conal.*—I bow to your decision, great Queen; and take my leave. Farewell! [*Turns to go.*]

*Ailill.*—One moment, O Hero! [*Conal pauses.*] They say it's unlucky to give a man a present of a dry cup. [*He goes to the sideboard for the wine.*] Drink now to your own prosperity. [*Fills the cup and another for himself.*]

*Conal.*—I thank you. Your health, Queen Maeve! and a long life to you. [*Drinks.*] Ailill, may your shadow never be less. [*They drink.*] Now, good-bye, once more.

*Ailill.*—Farewell, Conal, the Victorious!

*Maeve.*—Farewell.

*Conal bows, and goes out to the left. Maeve rings the gong. The servant re-appears at the right.*

*Maeve.*—Go to Cuchulain now, and ask him to come before us. [*The servant retires.*]

*Ailill.*—You can't say, I didn't help you out that time. [*He takes a gold cup from the sideboard.*] I suppose this will be the next token? [*He returns to his throne, and sits down.*] Wonderful man, Bricriu! Clever fellow! Absolutely unique!

*Maeve.*—If Ulster could produce one man with Bricriu's head on Cuchulain's body, there would be no withstanding her. But she cannot; so long live Imperial Connacht!

*Ailill.*—Long live golden mediocrity. Connacht has no Bricriu, and no Cuchulain, but she has plenty of men but little inferior to both.

*Maeve.*—And she has me, Maeve, the Queen.

*Ailill.*—Of course, dear.

*A cry of pain is heard without, and the servant staggers in with bleeding face.*

*Maeve.*—What's wrong? [*Springs to her feet.*]

*Servant* [*gasping*].—Cuchulain—he's angry—he cast a chessman at my head—I'm done for— [*He collapses on the floor, writhes a moment, and dies.*]

*Maeve* [*in fear, not grief*].—Woe is me! What a terrible boy he is when he's roused!

*Ailill*.—Well, I do think this is rather too much.

*Cuchulain enters from the left in a black fury.*

*Cuchulain*.—It is a nice thing, surely, Maeve, you to be sending a servant to fetch me to speak to you.

*Ailill* [*coming forward, as Maeve is too paralysed to speak*].—You needn't have killed him, anyway, Cuchulain. It wasn't his fault.

*Cuchulain*.—Pooh! A servant boy! I threw harder than I knew. Besides—what business had he to interrupt me during my game? Many a hero has met his death for less at my hands.

*Maeve* [*who has recovered her nerve, persuasively*].—Don't be angry, Cuchulain. It was I that sent him. I was impatient to give you the good news.

*Cuchulain* [*cooled, but sulky*].—I've good cause for anger. [*Curious in spite of himself*]. What's the news?

*Maeve* [*throwing her arms round his neck*].—Darling Cuchulain! Glorious son of Ulster, and flame of the heroes of Erin, to you we award the Champion's Portion of Ulster. As a token thereof [*releasing him, and giving him the cup which she takes from Ailill*] take this cup of gold, set with precious stones. Let no one see it till you get to Emain, and when the Portion is exhibited to be claimed by the Champion, then bring it forth as a sign. For the Championship is yours, and may you a live a hundred years to enjoy it.

*Cuchulain*—That my life might be brief and glorious has always been my prayer, and well have I always known that the Championship should be mine. Neither do I need any token, having always my own right arm to secure what is my due. . . . Still, Maeve, I thank you for your judgment and for your gift, and for your wish I give you another. May you live as long as your beauty and your wisdom live, and then may your end be swift and worthy of your life.

*Maeve*—A hero's wish truly. Let us solemnise it with wine. [*She fills Cuchulain's cup and two others*.]

*Ailill* [*as they stand with uplified cups*].—Then here's to glory, beauty, and a short life—to those that want it. [*They drink*.]

*Cuchulain*—Now with all speed to Emain Macha to claim my rights. Farewell both.

*Maeve*—Farewell, noble Cuchulain.

*Ailill*—May your way lie clear before you. Farewell.

*Cuchulain goes out. Ailill turning round sees the corpse at the foot of the dais.*

*Ailill*—What of that, my dear?

*Maeve* [*indifferently*]—It's easily removed. [*She taps the gong twice. Two servants enter.*] Clear that away, please. [*The corpse is carried out.*] *Cuchulain's* a nice-spoken boy for all his hot temper, isn't he, dear?

*Ailill*—Too conceited for my taste, but I suppose he'll grow out of it.

*Maeve*—This wasn't such a dull morning after all. I don't believe six such scandalous judgments were ever made before.

*Ailill*—Nearly lunch time, isn't it. [*He taps the gong.*]

*Maeve*—The rain has stopped. That reminds me [*She clatters a large brazen bell.*]

*In answer to Ailill's gong, a servant appears in the right-hand door. Maeve's bell brings a soldier to the left-hand door.*

*Ailill* [*to the servant*]—Let's have lunch up at once, please.

*Maeve* [*to the soldier*]—Have a party mobilised for a raid into Leinster immediately after lunch. [*The henchmen withdraw.*]

*Ailill*—Now we can breathe in peace again.

*Maeve*—Heroes and poets are both nuisances.

*Ailill*—And may the curse of all the Gods be on *Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue.*

*At which appropriate sentiment the curtain falls on Act II.*

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## ACT III.

*The great Hall in the House of the Red Branch at Emain Macha. In the centre at the back is a door leading into the Banquet Hall. In the left-hand wall is another door to the exterior. A great fire burns at the opposite wall, and in the angle between this and the back wall is a dais on which is the royal throne.*

*Fergus is discovered sitting in deep dejection before the fire. Cuchulain enters from without.*

*Cuchulain*—Who is that crouched there before the fire? [*Fergus looks up.*] Is it you, my master Fergus?

*Fergus*—Yes, it is I, Fergus Mac Roigh. And, indeed, little foster son, for once I am sorry to see you come to Emain. [*He rises and comes forward.*]

*Cuchulain*—Strange are the words you speak, Fergus, and strange is your appearance. There is shame on your brow and sorrow in your eyes, and I find you secluded here by yourself instead of sitting in the place of honour at the banquet. There seems to be a cloud of shame and sorrow hanging over all Emain Macha. The sentries at the gate looked at the ground when I passed them, and the King's groom averted his head while he took my bridle. No steward opened the door to me, and no servant came to usher me into the banquet. What is the meaning of it all, my master?

*Fergus*—'Tis hard for me to tell you that, little son, for my tongue is unused to telling tales that are not full of great deeds and the glory of Ulster. Neither can I go to sit at the banquet for the shame and sorrow that have fallen on the Red Branch.

*Cuchulain*—Tell me what has occurred, for it should be a strange tale, indeed, that showed Ulster in the place of dishonour.

*Fergus*—'Tis but three days since this disaster came upon us. It was in the evening, and the King and I and the rest of the Red Branch, all but yourself and Conal Cearnach were here passing the time with song and revelry, when suddenly the doors of the Hall opened, and a big uncouth fellow of exceeding ugliness came striding in. He was so tall that none of the men of Ulster could have reached his middle. He was clad in an old hide and carried a wooden block in one hand

and a tremendous axe in the other. Ravenous yellow eyes he had, and he glared round on us till the bravest felt uneasy. Then Sencha, son of Ailill, asked him what his business was, and he told us he was searching the world for a man who could keep a bargain. "And," says he, "since you Ulstermen make such a boast of your valour and virtues, I want to find if such a man is among you." Then Conchubar bade him name his bargain, and the giant said: "I set aside Conchubar for his kingship and Fergus for the same reason. These two excepted, will any man make this bargain with me: he to cut off my head to-night; I to cut off his head to-morrow night." There was no answer to this and the giant asked: "Where are those warriors who are contending for the Championship? Let them show their mettle." At this Laegaire came forward, not very willingly I thought, and agreed to the bargain. The giant handed him the axe and bent his head down on the block. Laegaire lifted the axe and dealt the giant a blow that hurled his head across the room. Immediately afterwards we were horrified to see the giant get up; recover his head, and the axe, and the block; and walk out into the night, his neck streaming with blood.

*Cuchulain*—This is indeed a strange tale. Go on.

*Fergus*—The following evening the giant returned, and found us all assembled as before, and full of wonder and expectation. But Laegaire had disappeared from Emain.

*Cuchulain*—So Laegaire the Triumphant failed to keep his word.

*Fergus*—Most lamentably he did. But on this occasion Conal Cearnach was present, and he agreed to the same bargain with the giant. Then the giant let Conal cut off his head, and walked off just as before. And, oh my grief, the hour of his return is at hand and Conal is nowhere to be found.

*Cuchulain*—'Tis hard to believe it of Conal. 'Twas a fool's bargain to make, but, once made, it should be kept. You say that the giant's hour is at hand?

*Fergus*—He came at the same hour each night, and that hour approaches. But let you, little son, make no bargain with the giant, for I well know that if you do you'll keep it, and Ulster would be loth to lose you.

*Cuchulain*—Give your advice to those who ask it, Fergus.— I hear a step. Who comes here?

*Bricriu enters from without.*

*Fergus*—Why, 'tis Bricriu. He of the Evil Tongue. Bricriu the Meddler. The man I flung into his own muck-heap.

*Cuchulain*—He seems none the worse for it.

*Bricriu* [*at the door*].—How dark and gloomy it is. Who's here ?

*Fergus*.—Don't you recognise me, Bricriu ? Has the muck blinded you permanently ?

*Bricriu*.—Faith, it has, for I seem to see nothing else.

*Fergus* [*furiously, stepping forward*].—Bricriu !

*Cuchulain* [*detaining him*].—Gently, Fergus. You brought that on yourself.

*Fergus* [*restraining himself*].—Let me be. He's not worth killing.

*Cuchulain*.—What brings you to Emain, Bricriu ?

*Bricriu*.—I have come to hear the judgment of Ailill and Maeve, so as to hand over the Champion's Portion to the winner.

*Cuchulain*.—Judgment ! Pah ! They shirked the decision. What think you of this, Bricriu ? They gave us each a cup in token of victory. True, mine was of gold and theirs of silver and bronze, but they said mine was bought, so Cathbad decided the matter must stand over for another trial.

*Bricriu*.—That's a bad business, for the Portion is deteriorating with keeping ; though, with cool pantries and fly-covers, Niabh does her best.

*Fergus*.—I hear the banquetters rising. Here they come.

*The doors of the Banqueting Hall open, and Conchubar and the men of the Red Branch enter. Conchubar seats himself on his throne, and the heroes scatter over the room, some sitting at little tables to play chess, some chatting round the fire. Bricriu and Cuchuain go up to the dais to pay their respects to the King.*

*Conchubar* [*to Cuchulain*].—Welcome to Emain, little nephew. What deeds of valour have kept you away from us so long ?

*Cuchulain*.—No deeds of valour, indeed, O King ; but disgust at being kept out of my rights. And, let me tell you, Conchubar, my disgust has not been lessened by discovering what cravens have disputed it with me. [*He bows, and presently retires to a seat by the fire.*]

*Conchubar*.—So you have heard the tale of the giant ? Indeed, 'tis not a pleasant one. [*Noticing Bricriu.*]

Welcome to Emain, Bricriu ! How is the lady Niabh ?

*Bricriu.*—In the best of health, O King ; but busy spring-cleaning.

*Conchubar.*—Convey her my compliments when you return. [*Aloud to the company in general.*] Men of the Red Branch, in this sorrow that has fallen upon us, we cannot do better than cheer our hearts with song. Where is my bard ?

*The Bard* [*coming forward*].—Here, your majesty.

*Conchubar.*—Sing us a song, and let it be one of a cheerful kind.

*The Bard.*—Then I shall sing an ode in celebration of our celebrated banquet at Dun Rudraige. [*He tunes his harp, and sings.*]

Haste to the banquet at lovely Dun Rudraige !

Haste to the banquet with watering teeth !

Ho ! for the product of vineyard and brewery !

Ho ! for the beeves from the pastures of Meath !

Ho ! for the wild boar we chased thro' the barren lands !

Ho ! for the tame, fed on wheat-cake and fruit !

Ho ! for the peacock imported from foreign lands !

Brought by the pirates of Howth with their loot.

Ho ! for our host in his snug little grianan !

Ho ! for his subsequent seat in the muck !

Tell me, good sirs, will he ever get free anon,

Or do you think he's eternally stuck ?

*Fergus.*—Well sung ! Well sung ! [*Claps vigorously.*]

*Bricriu.*—It's well for you to clap your hands, Fergus for it's a nice return for hospitality that that song celebrates !

*Conchubar.*—'Tis all meant in fun, Bricriu. Don't mind it. Won't you oblige us yourself ?

*Bricriu.*—I will, then. [*He comes forward, and takes the harp, which the Bard abandons.*] I'll sing you the song of the accession of Conchubar.

*Fergus* [*angrily.*].—I won't allow that song to be sung here.

*Conchubar.*—Gently, Fergus, gently. You are not King in Emain.

*Fergus.*—Well, I'm going out till it's over. [*Leave his seat and makes for the Banquet Hall door, where h*

*turns back menacingly on Bricriu.] Bitterly, Bricriu, shall you rue this day !*

*Bricriu.—I'll chance it.*

*Fergus goes out, and Bricriu sits at the harp. After a few preliminary chords he sings :*

*Bricriu :*

Connor Mac Nessa is King in Emain,  
And rules it right well.

And what was the way that he started to reign ?

Hark, while I tell.

'Twas the wit of his mother that got him the place,  
Nessa, the wise.

Fine was her figure, and fair was her face ;

Wondrous her eyes—

Sparkling and bright as the spray of a spring,

Deep as a loch ;

And they made her the queen of the heart of the  
King—

Fergus Mac Rogh.

“ Lady,” says Fergus, with love stricken down,

“ Name your desire.

“ 'Tis granted already—though half of my crown

“ Be what you require.”

Says Nessa : “ You've managed the wish of my  
heart

“ Just to forestall ;

“ But I won't cause dissension by taking a part,

“ So give me it all !

“ Let Connor, my son, take your place for a year :

“ That is my boon ;

And let you come away with your Nessa, my dear,

“ For a long honeymoon.”

So Connor was crowned, by Ulster's consent,

Without bother or strife ;

And Fergus away on his honeymoon went

With Nessa, his wife.

Now Connor was generous, comely, and bold,

Valiant in doing ;

And he made himself loved while the monarch of  
old

Was billing and cooing.

Now, if ever a folk hated changes of rule

The bold Ulster men did ;

So Fergus's chance of return had grown cool

When a twelve-month was ended.



Said Ulster—" He cared for our kingship a lot  
 For a woman to leave us,  
 " So now let him stick to the wife he has got—  
 " His loss will not grieve us.  
 " Let Connor remain on the throne in his place,  
 " A monarch more fitting ;  
 " And Fergus can gaze on his wife's pretty face,  
 " And help with her knitting."  
 And that is how Connor Mac Nessa is King  
 In the halls of Emain.  
 All over Ulster his praises they sing.  
 Long may he reign !

*A Warrior.*—That's a good song.

*Another.*—'Tis a brave man would sing that song in face of the anger of Fergus.

*Another.*—Ah ! 'tis a bitter-tongued man he is, and 'tis his bitterness makes him brave.

*Bricriu stands up to leave the harp, and at the same moment, the terrible figure described by Fergus enters. A hush falls on the assembly, and Fergus returns.*

*Bricriu*—Who on earth are you ?

*The Giant*—I am he who goes seeking that which he cannot find. Europe, Asia, and Africa have I searched, and Alba and England and the three provinces of Erin, yet I cannot find a man who can keep a bargain with me. I am Uath Mac Imomain, Terror, the son of Great Fear, and I have come to claim my covenant with Conal Cearnach. Where are you, Conal ? [*A pause.*] He answers not. I expected as much. Faith, it's a fine people you are surely [*very scornfully*], two of your heroes to fail me in a bargain publicly made ; you that have the reputation of excelling all other lands in strength and prowess and valour, in truth, generosity, and worth. [*Glaring round on the assembly*] Where is that poor squinting fellow, Cuchulain ? Let us see if his word is any better than the others.

*Cuchulain*—I desire no covenant with you, fellow.

*The Giant*—Very likely, you miserable cuckoo, for great is your fear of death,.

*Cuchulain* [*leaping furiously to his feet*]—Give me the axe, shag-head. [*He rushes at him and seizes it.*] Step outside now, for I will cut off your head to-night, and you shall cut mine off to-morrow night.

*The Giant*—Nay. You men of Ulster cannot be trusted for so long. I shall return within the hour for your part of the bargain. So fail me not.

*Cuchulain*—Come outside, clod-hopper, that I may finish you.

*Cuchulain with the axe, and the giant with the block go out by the the left-hand door. The men of the Red Branch throng to the door to watch the proceedings, all except Bricriu, who remains standing near the harp, Fergus who remains near the Banquet Hall door, and Conchubar who does not leave his seat. The impact of axe on wood is heard, followed by an exclamation from the crowd. A moment later Cuchulain re-appears, pushing his way through the crowd till he reaches his former seat. Here he sits with his head on his hands. The men of the Red Branch return slowly to their places. After a short silence Cuchulain raises his head.*

*Cuchulain [mournfully]*—What is this that I have done? Stay with me, men of Ulster, till my pledge to the son of Fear be fulfilled. For death awaits me, and I would rather have death with honour.

*Fergus [sentimentally]*—Little son, your name shall be a star of light shining on Erin to the end of the ages, but for us you are leaving there is nothing but sorrow and desolation. And now, indeed, we can do little else but keen you.

*Cuchulain*—No. Spare me that.— Bricriu!

*Bricriu [who has meanwhile retired into the shadows, now comes forward]*—I am here, *Cuchulain*.

*Cuchulain*—If you would do me a last favour, pray take the edge off my sorrow with a song.

*Bricriu*—Indeed, *Cuchulain*, I wish I could do anything to comfort you, but at a moment like this a song of mine would be considered bad taste. They want to enjoy the luxury of their grief undiluted.

*Cuchulain*—Till tragedy comes at first hand who can tell how close akin it is to farce. Well, *Bricriu*, let us respect their prejudices, but heaven spare me a dirge.

*Silence again falls on the company. All watch Cuchulain furtively. Bricriu again withdraws into the shadow. Emer enters, followed by her attendants. No one moves. She looks around nervously, sees Cuchulain, runs up to him, and drops on her knee beside him.*

*Emer*—What is this I hear, *Cuchulain*? What have you done?

*Cuchulain*—*Emer*, why ask? The tears in your eyes and your voice tell me that you know.

*Emer*—So the pact is made? Alas, *Cuchulain*, 'twas a hot and foolish thing to do.

*Cuchulain*—Faith, none knows that better than I. But 'tis done. A bargain is a bargain and must be kept.

*Emer*—'Tis no fair bargain between an immortal and a man.

*Cuchulain*—May be so. But he carried out his part and so must I.

*Emer*—Shall the hero and darling of Ulster be cut off in the bloom of his youth for a fool's bargain made in a moment of rage?

*Cuchulain*—Needs must, if he is to remain the hero and darling of Ulster.

*Emer*—Cuchulain, I have no wit to argue, but I cannot let you die.

*Cuchulain*—Dear, I would willingly live, but I would not have Ulster dishonoured through me.

*Emer*—Dear, you are the prop and mainstay of Ulster. If you are taken away she falls.

*Cuchulain*—If Ulster cannot stand without me, then is she unworthy to stand at all. Let her fall.

*Emer* [*her calmness giving way*]—Cuchulain, my darling, my choice of the men of Ireland, do not leave me. I can say no more. I can only cling to you and weep.

*Cuchulain*—Nay, Emer, spare me this. I needs must die, and 'tis best done in a seemly manner.

*Emer*—I cannot move him. [*Turns despairingly to Fergus*] O Fergus, you are his foster father. Speak to him.

*Fergus* [*solemnly*]—Indeed, I would not have had him make this bargain, but now that it is made I cannot urge him to break it.

*Emer*—Oh, it's a fine thing to be able to talk like that, and to put a bargain before the life of a man. [*Turns to Conchubar*] Conchubar, you are the king. Will you allow this murder?

*Conchubar*—It is not for me to command a hero to break his plighted word.

*Emer* [*impatiently*]—O, men! men! men! Will you never look on reality? Here is a man waiting on death, and you calmly talk of honour and pledges.

*Cuchulain*—Honour is more to me than life, Emer. Death is but a pang; dishonour an everlasting torment.

*Emer*—Honour will be a small consolation to me when I see your fair body bleeding on the ground.

*Cuchulain*—You speak like no hero's wife, Emer.

*Emer*—Indeed, Cuchulain, 'tis no hero's death I hold you back from, but the death of a vagabond and a thief. On the day I hold you back from the battle, then say I am no hero's wife. But, O, 'tis my grief to see Cuchulain, the bright candle of the Gael, tamely surrendering his neck to a clumsy churl.

*Cuchulain*—*Emer*, there is no way of dying I like less than this, but a bond is a bond, and if a churl keep his word shall Cuchulain fail? I pray you now, leave me to die in peace, for I am weary of words.

*Emer* [*desperately*]—Oh, what is the use of all this? To-morrow the sun will rise and the wind will rustle in the trees, and the birds will sing, and Cuchulain will be no more. And all for nothing. Speak to him, *Bricriu*, you that have sense and have no use for fine phrases.

*Bricriu* [*coming forward*]—Cuchulain, I won't ask you to break your word, for I know that would be useless. But your word given under false pretences is not given at all, and it will be time for you to keep your part of the bargain when the giant keeps his.

*Cuchulain*—He has done so.

*Bricriu*—He has not. No man can live with his head cut off, therefore it is obvious that if Uath still lives his head is not off.

*Cuchulain*—All the Red Branch saw me cut it off.

*Bricriu*—Then Uath Mac Imomain is no mortal at all, and such a bargain is invalid.

*Cuchulain*—No, *Bricriu*, these tricks of argument cannot move me. And now, *Emer*, I pray you leave me. For my death is coming to me, and it is not fitting that you should see it.

*Emer rises, embraces him violently, and then goes out in silence, followed by her maidens. Cuchulain looks round wearily for Bricriu, and speaks to him.*

*Cuchulain*.—Sing to me, *Bricriu*. 'Tis my last request.

*Bricriu* [*taking the harp*].—As you wish, *Cuchulain*. [*Sings.*]

In this green isle it would not do  
For me to try and comfort you.

It would not do when death is nigh  
To mingle laughter with a sigh:  
Salt tears, instead, I ought to brew.

It would not do when things are blue  
 To substitute another hue.  
 Depravity it would imply  
 In this green isle.

For if you scorn the epic view  
 And epic doings dare poo-pooh,  
 Or lay the epic language by  
 To crack a joke when heroes die ;  
 Your rashness you shall surely rue  
 In this green isle.

*The silence that follows this song is broken by a heavy, but distant footfall. All watch Cuchulain, who remains unmoved. The steps get nearer and louder, the outer door is flung open, and the Giant strides in. He brings down his axe and block on the floor with a crash.*

*The Giant.*—Where is Cuchulain ?

*Cuchulain.*—Here I am.

*The Giant.*—'Tis dull of speech you are this moment. And 'tis easy seen you are afraid to die. Still, however great your fear you have not failed me. Come and lay your head on the block. [*Cuchulain comes forward, kneels down, and puts his head on the block.*] Stretch out your neck, you wretch.

*Cuchulain [looking up].*—You are keeping me in torment. Despatch me quickly, as I did to you. [*He returns to the prone position.*]

*The Giant.*—I cannot slay you, what with the size of the block and the shortness of your neck. [*Cuchulain stretches out his neck as far as he can.*] That'll do. [*He raises the axe above his head. All the men of the Red Branch turn their faces away. The Giant brings down the axe with a crash on to the floor. There is a moment's pause.*] Rise, Cuchulain ! [*Cuchulain lifts his head from the block, but remains kneeling.*] Of the warriors of Ulster and of Erin, no matter what their mettle, none is found to compare with you in valour and truth. To you I award the Sovereignty of the Heroes of Erin, and the Champion's Portion of Ulster to boot, and to your lady the precedence of the ladies of Ulster in the banquet hall. And whosoever shall dispute your right in this, he shall have me to deal with.

*Bricriu.*—And who are you ?

*The Giant.*—I am Curoi Mac Daire, and I came here to prove to you all, what I knew myself already, that

Cuchulain is the bravest man in Ulster : aye, and in Erin !

*Curoi takes up his axe and block and goes out. The men of Ulster rise to their feet and brandish their swords with a great shout.*

*The Warriors.*—Hail ! Cuchulain ! Our chieftain for ever !

*Cuchulain.*—I thank you, my friends ; though I think you might have known it before.

*Conchubar.*—Now that the cloud which threatened us has lifted, let us return to the Banquet Hall, and celebrate this great event in wine.

*A Hero.*—Carry Cuchulain to the seat of honour.

*Cuchulain is raised on the shoulders of some of the warriors and carried into the Banquet Hall. The whole Red Branch flocks in behind, the King almost unnoticed in the throng. Bricriu is left alone.*

*Bricriu.*—And all this for a point of precedence ! Well, well ! On these occasions I feel distinctly out of place.

*He goes away pensively by the outer door.*

## EPILOGUE.

*Before the Palace of Dun Rudraige. Bricriu, Niabh, and Cuchulain come out through the doors.*

*Bricriu.*—Well, Cuchulain, you have added the Championship of Ulster to your fame, and the Champion's Portion of my house to your property. Let me congratulate you.

*Cuchulain.*—The Champion's Portion is a thing of small importance, but 'tis a great thing to be the acknowledged champion of Ulster—late as the acknowledgment came.

*Niabh.*—Indeed, Cuchulain, it wasn't hard to see who was champion. I saw it myself long ago.

*Cuchulain.*—I am honoured to hear you say so, Niabh.

*Niabh.*—And now that every thing is over, and this episode in our lives is closed, will you tell me, Bricriu, what has been the object of it all? You deliberately started a quarrel which has kept all Ulster on edge for six months, and left us in the end where we started. Explain yourself, please.

*Cuchulain.*—Yes, Bricriu. I have long wondered what purpose you fulfil in Ulster. Pray expound to us.

*Bricriu.*—Certainly, if you wish it. I have what is called in the cant phrase a mission in life. When I first looked out over the five provinces of Ireland, I saw that Ulster was good and that the others were not. I looked east and saw Leinster, groaning under foreign oppression, every now and then making splendidly futile revolts, and failing principally on account of her preference for incompetent talkers as leaders. In the same glance I saw the timid merchants of Dublin paying toll to the pirates of Howth, always with a grumble, but always with regularity. Then I looked south and saw Munster, over-civilised, abandoned altogether to art and culture, and so absorbed in art as to have forgotten life. I looked west and saw Connacht, overburdened with the cares of Empire, and so busy trying to rule Leinster and Clare and Strathclyde that

she had no time to rule herself. And then I looked at Ulster, and saw a land of perpetual strife, where no man took another at his own valuation, where art and culture were kept in their proper places, and where a man's safety was in proportion to his strength and prowess; and, seeing this, I was glad.

*Niabh.*—But you were never tired scoffing at it all.

*Bricriu.*—Yes, because, as it stood, it was all very ridiculous, but I saw in it the raw material for something better. But do you appreciate the contrast, so far? Do you see the point?

*Cuchulain.*—I'm not sure that I do.

*Niabh.*—I'm afraid I don't.

*Bricriu.*—On the one side I saw contentment; on the other action. To act is to live. Contentment is death. Look at Connacht, drunk with its own glory. Would you be a Connacht man, Cuchulain?

*Cuchulain.*—I would not.

*Bricriu.*—Look at Munster, a land where everyone pays compliments to everyone else, where every versicle is a great poem, and every poetaster a bard, and where all that is of Munster is considered perfection and all else worthless. Would you be a Munster man, Cuchulain?

*Cuchulain.*—I would not.

*Bricriu.*—And look at Leinster, luxuriating in the emotionalism of an age-long fight against tyranny. I won't insult you by asking would you be a Leinster man, Cuchulain

*Cuchulain.*—Faith, you're right.

*Bricriu.*—But I foresaw a danger to Ulster, lest she also should achieve contentment by falling under the spell of her own military glory. I feared that her heroes might rest and get fat by feasting and bragging, and her poets fall back on the deeds of the past for their themes. So I decided to be a centre of strife in the province, and to that object I have devoted my life.

*Cuchulain.*—And well have you succeeded.

*Bricriu.*—Don't you think I was right?

*Cuchulain.*—It's hard for me to say. I have to do the fighting.

*Niabh.*—It makes Ulster a very unpleasant place for quiet people to live in.

*Bricriu.*—All the better. She will be head province of Ireland, which is a better destiny for her than to become an asylum for old ladies. If I let Ulster alone she would degenerate and become like the rest. What



chance would Ireland have then? Could we resist a Roman invasion? It's the fear of Ulster that has kept the Romans out so far.

*Cuchulain.*—That's true. Not long ago I was visited at Dundéalgan by a captain of a Roman trading ship, who told me that the Romans, after their easy conquest of Britain, thought to annex us just as readily, until they heard in Britain of the fame of the Red Branch Knights, which decided them not to be too hasty.

*Bricriu.*—Doesn't that justify me? And yet I'm the most unpopular man in the country—nicknamed "Ericriu of the Bitter Tongue," too. Instead of calling me names they ought to honour me as the maker of modern Ulster.

*Cuchulain.*—They ought, indeed.

*Bricriu.*—But of course they don't understand what's good for them.

*Niabh.*—Of course they don't.

*Cuchulain* [as the conversation halts.]—And now, I must go. Emer is waiting for me at sunny Dundéalgan.

*Niabh.*—It's a good holiday you'll want after all this excitement, and, faith, you've earned enough glory to last you the rest of your days!

*Cuchulain.*—Shame on you, *Niabh*, to forget your husband's teaching so quickly. I shall never relapse into contentment.

*Bricriu.*—A man's wife is his last convert, *Cuchulain*.

*Cuchulain.*—That's true. But now that I am Champion of Ulster, I shall flesh my sword in the men of Erin, till I become their champion too or die in the attempt.

*Bricriu.*—That's right, *Cuchulain*. Ireland will break you, but it is right that you should try to conquer her. Would that I had your body, *Cuchulain*!

*Cuchulain.*—Nay. Would that I had your head.

*Bricriu.*—'Tis all the same. We three rolled into one would make—if I may coin a phrase—"Some man." I, the maker of fights. You, *Cuchulain*, the fighter.

*Niabh.*—And, I?

*Bricriu.*—You keep the ring, my dear. We three stand for the making of Ulster, which, but for us, would become as the other provinces. What do you think would happen then?

*Cuchulain.*—I suppose the Romans would conquer us.

*Bricriu.*—Indeed, you wouldn't have to go so far as that. Anyone at all could conquer us.

*Cuchulain.*—Maybe they could.

*Bricriu.*—Why, we might even go down before those blue-painted savages in England.

*Cuchulain.*—Ah, no. That's a bit too far-fetched. It's simply ridiculous.

*Bricriu.*—Clearer to me is a whisper than to any one else a cry. Stranger things than that have happened.

*Niabh.*—Don't mind him, Cuchulain. He's in one of his mystifying moods. Come inside and drink a glass of wine with us before you go.

*Cuchulain.*—Thank you. I think I will.

*Bricriu shrugs his shoulders. Niabh leads them into the house.*





















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