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THE PHANTOM CHARIOT OF CU CHULAINN

The Christian writers of early Ireland were more kindly disposed toward their native pagan traditions than were the other newly converted peoples of medieval Europe. Holy men associate freely with fairy beings, St. Patrick listens with delight to the exploits of Finn and Oisín (p. 457), and he even uses his divine power to call back Cu Chulainn from the grave that the stiff-necked Loegaire, pagan high-king of Ireland, may be led to accept the new faith. Whoever conceived the idea of bringing together the most distinguished ancient pagan champion and the most beloved of Christian saints had a truly poetic imagination.

Patrick went to Tara to enjoin belief upon the King of Erin, that is, upon Loegaire, son of Niall, who was King of Erin at the time; for he would not believe in the Lord though He had been preached unto him.

Loegaire said to Patrick: "By no means will I believe in thee, nor yet in God, until thou shalt call up Cu Chulainn in all his dignity, as he is recorded in the old stories, that I may see him, and that I may address him in my presence here; after that I will believe in thee."

"Even this thing is possible for God," said Patrick.

Then a messenger came from God to Patrick, and he said that Patrick and Loegaire should remain until the morrow on the rampart of the rath of Tara, and that Cu Chulainn would appear to him there.

After the appearance of Cu Chulainn to him in his chariot, Loegaire went to converse with Patrick. Patrick said to Loegaire: "Has something indeed appeared to thee?"

"Something has indeed appeared to me," said Loegaire; "but I have not power to relate it, unless thou wilt sign and consecrate my mouth."

"I will not sign thy mouth," said Patrick, "until I have my demand. I will, however, make a sign on the air that comes out of thy mouth, in order that thou mayest describe the apparition which was shown to thee."

“As I was going,” said Loegaire, “over the Slope of the Chariot to the Hill of the Fairy-mound of the Plain, in the Plateau of the Assembly in the plain of Mac Oc, I saw the cold piercing wind, like a double-barbed spear. It hardly spared to take the hair from our heads, and to go through us to the earth. I asked of Benen the meaning of the wind. Benen said to me, ‘That is the wind of hell after its opening before Cu Chulainn.’ We saw then the heavy fog which dropped upon us. I asked also of Benen the meaning of the heavy fog. Benen said that the fog was the breath of men and of horses that were traversing the plain before me.

“Then we saw a great raven-flock on high above us. The country was full of birds, and in height they reached to the clouds of heaven. I asked of Benen about these and he said they were sods thrown up by the hoofs of the horses that were yoked to Cu Chulainn’s chariot. After that we saw the forms of the horses through the mist, and of men in the easy chariot; a charioteer on high behind them; a spirit-chieftain; horses that rode paths.

“I observed after this the two horses; equal in size and beauty were they, and only unlike in form and color; in swiftness, in symmetry, in action, equal. Broad were their hoofs and broad their backs; in color beautiful; in height, in vehemence, remarkable. Their heads were small: large-lipped, bright-eyed. Red of chest, sleek and well-knit, they yielded promptly to the yoke; they attracted attention by the lofty dignity of their movements; their manes and tails hung down in curls.

“Behind the pair a wide-spaced chariot. Beneath it, two black solid wheels; above it, two symmetrical, overlapping reins; its shafts firm and straight as swords; the reins adorned and pliant; the pole, white silver with a withe of white bronze; the yoke, firm, ridged, and made of gold; the hood, purple; the fittings, green.

“Within the chariot a warrior was visible. His hair was thick and black, and smooth as though a cow had licked it. In his head his eye gleamed swift and grey. About him was flung a tunic of purple-blue, its borders of white gold lacing. It was clasped with a brooch of red gold upon his breast; it floated out over each of his two shoulders. A white hooded cloak hung about him with a border of flaming red. A sword with a hilt of gold lying in a rest on his two thighs; and in his hand a broad gray spear on a shaft

of wild ash. Beside it lay a sharp venomous dart. Across his shoulders he bore a purple shield surrounded by an even circle of silver; upon it were chased loop-animals in gold. Into his mouth a shower of pearls seemed to have been thrown. Blacker than the side of a black cooking-spit each of his two brows, redder than ruby his lips.

"Before him in the chariot was the charioteer; a very slender, tall and lank, stooped, very freckled man. Very curly red hair on the top of his head; a band of white bronze on his forehead, that prevented his hair from falling about his face. Above his two ears spheres of gold, into which his hair was gathered. About him was a winged little cloak, with an opening at its two elbows. He held in his hand a small whip of red gold with which he urged on his horses. It seemed to me that it was Cu Chulainn and Loeg, his charioteer, who were within the chariot, and that it was the Black of Sainglenn and the Gray of Macha that were yoked to it."

"Dost thou believe in God henceforth, O Loegaire," said Patrick, "since Cu Chulainn came to converse with thee?"

"If it were Cu Chulainn that I saw, it seems to me that he stayed too short a time conversing with me."

"God is powerful," said Patrick. "If it were indeed Cu Chulainn, he will return and converse with thee again."

Now they remained still in the same place, and they perceived the chariot coming across the plain towards them drawn by its two horses. Within rode Cu Chulainn garbed as a warrior, and Loeg mac Rianganbra as his charioteer. Then in mid-air Cu Chulainn performed twenty-seven feats of skill above them. The Noise-feat of Nine, that is the Feat of Cat, the Feat of Cuar, and the Feat of Daire, the Blind-feat of Birds, the Leap over Poison, the Bed-folding of a Brave Champion, the Bellows-dart, the Stroke with Quickness, the Ardor of Shout, the Hero's Scream, the Wheel-feat, the Edge-feat, the Apple-feat, and the Noise-feat; the Ascent by rope, the Straightening of Body on Spear-point, the Binding of a Noble Champion, the Return-stroke, and the Stroke with Measure.

As for the charioteer, the management of the reins confounds all speech: he was above the evaporations and breathings of the horses.

Then Cu Chulainn went to converse with Patrick and saluted him, saying:

I beseech, O holy Patrick,
In thy presence that I may be,
That thou wouldst bring me with thy faithful ones,
Into the Land of the Living.

Then he addressed the king thus: "Believe in God and in holy Patrick, O Loegaire, that earth's surface may not come over thee; for it is not a demon that has come to thee: it is Cu Chulainn mac Sualtam. A world for every champion is law of earth, every quiet one's is concealment, every hero's is earth, every holy one's is heaven: for of the order of demons is everything thou ponderest on: it is the world of each in turn that thou chariotest."

Cu Chulainn was silent, and Loegaire did not speak.

"Who chariots the Men of Breg, O Loegaire? Who sits their slopes? Who watches their fords? Whom do their wives elope with? Whom do their daughters love?"

"What is that inquiry to me and to thee?" asked Loegaire.

"There was a time, O Loegaire, when it was I who used to go among them, who used to go around them, who used to keep them together. I was their little champion whom they used to love: whom with high spirits they used to play about. There was a time, O Loegaire, when it was I who used to go to their great attacks, who used to burst their great contests. I was the battle-victorious, loud-shouting, red-wristed, broad-palmed, brave Cu Chulainn, who used to be on the rich plain of Muirthemne. Believe in God and in Patrick, O Loegaire, for it is not a demon that has come to thee, but Cu Chulainn son of Sualtam."

"If it is Cu Chulainn that is here present," said Loegaire, "he will tell us of his great deeds."

"That is true, O Loegaire," said Cu Chulainn. "I was the destroyer of hostageship in the reception of the fords of my territories; I was heavy of hand on heroes and great hosts. I used to hunt the fleet herds of my enemies in the full rushries, and left their flocks live-dead upon the mountains after the slaying in equal combat of the men who were over them."

"If thou didst indeed those deeds that thou recountest, the deeds of a hero were with thee; but they were not the deeds of Cu."

"That is true, O Loegaire," said Cu Chulainn.

PHANTOM CHARIOT OF CU CHULAINN 351

I was not a hound of taking of a fort,
I was a hound of taking of a deer:
I was not a hound of a forbidden trotter,
I was a hound strong for combat:
I was not a hound of round lickings of leavings,
I was a hound who visited the troops:
I was not a hound to watch over calves,
I was a hound to guard Emain Macha.

"If those deeds are as thou recountest them, the deeds of a hero were with thee."

"That is true, O Loegaire," said Cu Chulainn: "the deeds of a hero were with me."

I was a hero, I was a leader;
I was the charioteer of a great chariot;
I was gentle to the gentle,
But against dishonor I wrought vengeance.

"I was not the poison-tongue of my territories; I was the casket of every secret for the maidens of Ulster. I was a child with children; I was a man with men. It was for correction I used to labor. I was good in spite of satirizing; I was better for praising."

"If it be Cu Chulainn that is here," said Loegaire, "he will tell us a portion of the great risks he risked."

"That is true, O Loegaire," said Cu Chulainn.

I used to hunt their great flocks
With hardy Conchobar:
It was in a foreign territory,
I used to behold each victory.

I played on breaths
Above the horses' steam:
Before me on every side
Great battles were broken.

I broke contests
On the champions of the territories:
I was the sword-red hero
After the slaying of hosts.

I broke edge-feats
On the points of their swords:
I reached their great spoils,
Were it through drivings of fire!

(The next stanzas describe a journey in which Cu Chulainn waged battles in Lochlann on the north, and slew a giant. He continues:)

A journey I went, O Loegaire,
When I went into the Land of Scath:
Dun Scaith in it with its locks of iron—
I laid hand upon it.

Seven walls about that city—
Hateful was the fort:
A palisade of irons on each wall,
On which were nine heads.

Doors of iron on each side—
Not strong defences against us:
I struck them with my foot,
And drove them into fragments.

There was a pit in the dun,
Belonging to the king, so it is said:
Ten serpents burst
Over its border—it was a great deed!

After that I attacked them,
Though vast the throng,
Until I made bits of them
Between my two fists

There was a house full of toads,
That were let loose upon us;
Sharp, beaked monsters
That clave to my snout.

Fierce dragon-like monsters
Were sent against us;
Strong were their witcheries

After that I attacked them;
When a rush was made on me,
I ground them into small pieces
Between my two palms.

There was a cauldron in that dun;¹
The calf of the three cows:
Thirty joints of meat in its girth
Were not a charge for it.

The cows used to frequent that cauldron,
Delightful was the contest;
They would not go from it on any side,
Until they left it full.

¹ See p. 328.

There was much gold and silver in it—
 Wonderful was the find:
 That cauldron was given to us
 By the daughter of the king.

The three cows we carried off—
 They swam boldly over the sea:
 There was a load of gold for two men
 To each of them on her neck.

After we had come upon the ocean,
 Which spread out towards the north,
 The crew of my currach was engulfed
 By the fierce storm.

After this I floated them—
 Though it was a sharp danger—
 Nine men on each of my hands,
 Thirty on my head.

Eight upon my two sides
 Clung to my body.
 Thus I swam the ocean
 Until I reached the harbor.

What I suffered of trouble,
 O Loegaire, by sea and land:—
 Yet more severe was a single night,
 When the demon was wrathful.

My little body was scarred—
 With Lugaid the victory:
 Demons carried off my soul
 Into the red charcoal.

I played the swordlet on them,
 I plied on them the *gae bulga*;
 I was in my complete victory
 With the demon in pain.

Great as was my heroism,
 Hard as was my sword,
 The devil crushed me with one finger
 Into the red charcoal!

(Cu Chulainn endeavors to persuade King Loegaire to believe in God and Patrick, by dwelling on the pains of hell, in which are lying the champions of Ulster. He extols Patrick's power in having conjured him up. He concludes:)

Though thine were a perpetual life
 Of earth, with its beauty,
 Better is a single reward in heaven
 With Christ, Son of the living God.

I beseech, O holy Patrick,
 In thy presence, that I may come,
 That thou wouldst bring me with thy faithful ones
 Unto the land which thou drivest about.

“Believe in God and holy Patrick, O Loegaire, that a wave of earth may not come over thee. It will come, unless thou believest in God and in holy Patrick, for it is not a demon that has come to thee: it is Cu Chulainn son of Sualtam.”

Now, that thing indeed happened: earth came over Loegaire; Heaven was decreed for Cu Chulainn. Loegaire believed in Patrick in consequence.

Great was the power of Patrick in awakening Cu Chulainn after being nine times fifty years in the grave; that is, from the reign of Conchobar mac Nessa,—it is he that was born in co-birth with Christ—to the end of the reign of Loegaire, son of Niall, son of Eochaid Muigmedoin, son of Muiredach Tirech, son of Fiachra Roptine, son of Cairbre Liffechar, son of Cormac Ulfada, son of Art Oenfer, son of Conn the Hundred-Fighter, son of Feradach Rechtmar, son of Tuathal Techtmar, son of Feradach Finnfachtnach, son of Crimthann Niadnar, son of Lugaid of the Red Stripes. And he (*i.e.*, Lugaid) was a foster-son to Cu Chulainn son of Sualtam.