

generations after them. Five days and four nights, or five nights and four days, the pangs lasted. For nine generations any Ulsterman in those pangs had no more strength than a woman on the bed of labour. Only three classes of people were free from the pangs of Ulster: the young boys of Ulster, the women, and Cúchulainn. Ulster was thus afflicted from the time of Cruinniuc, the son of Agnoman, son of Curir Ulad, son of Fiatach mac Urmi, until the time of Furc, the son of Dallán, son of Mainech mac Lugdach. (It is from Curir Ulad that the province and people of Ulster — Ulad — have their name.)



#### EXILE OF THE SONS OF UISLIU

What caused the exile of the sons of Uisliu?  
It is soon told.

**THE MEN** of Ulster were drinking in the house of Conchobor's storyteller, Fedlimid mac Daill. Fedlimid's wife was over-seeing everything and looking after them all. She was full with child. Meat and drink were passed round, and a drunken uproar shook the place. When they were ready to sleep the woman went to her bed. As she crossed the floor of the house the child screamed in her womb and was heard all over the enclosure. At that scream every-

one in the house started up, ready to kill. Sencha mac Ailella said:

'No one move! Bring the woman here. We'll see what caused this noise.'

So the woman was brought before them. Her husband Fedlimid said:

'Woman,  
what was that fierce shuddering sound  
furious in your troubled womb?  
The weird uproar at your waist  
hurts the ears of all who hear it.  
My heart trembles at some great terror  
or some cruel injury.'

She turned distracted to the seer Cathbad:

'Fair-faced Cathbad, hear me  
— prince, pure, precious crown,  
grown huge in druid spells.  
I can't find the fair words  
that would shed the light of knowledge  
for my husband Fedlimid,  
even though it was the hollow  
of my own womb that howled.  
No woman knows what her womb bears.'

Then Cathbad said:

'A woman with twisted yellow tresses,  
green-irised eyes of great beauty  
and cheeks flushed like the foxglove  
howled in the hollow of your womb.  
I say that whiter than the snow  
is the white treasure of her teeth;  
Parthian-red, her lip's lustre.  
Ulster's chariot-warriors  
will deal many a blow for her.'

There howled in your troubled womb  
 a tall, lovely, long-haired woman.  
 Heroes will contend for her,  
 high kings beseech on her account;  
 then, west of Conchobor's kingdom  
 a heavy harvest of fighting men.  
 High queens will ache with envy  
 to see those lips of Parthian-red  
 opening on her pearly teeth,  
 and see her pure perfect body.'

Cathbad placed his hand on the woman's belly and  
 the baby wriggled under it.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is a girl there. Derdriu shall be  
 her name. She will bring evil.'

Then the daughter was born and Cathbad said:

'Much damage, Derdriu, will follow  
 your high fame and fair visage:  
 Ulster in your time tormented,  
 demure daughter of Fedlimid.

And later, too, jealousy  
 will dog you, woman like a flame,  
 and later still — listen well —  
 the three sons of Uisliu exiled.

Then again, in your lifetime,  
 a bitter blow struck in Emain.  
 Remorse later for that ruin  
 wrought by the great son of Roech;

Fergus exiled out of Ulster  
 through your fault, fatal woman,  
 and the much-wept deadly wound  
 of Fiachna, Conchobor's son.

Your fault also, fatal woman,  
 Gerrce felled, Illadan's son,  
 and a crime that no less cries out,  
 the son of Durthacht, Eogan, struck.

Harsh, hideous deeds done  
 in anger at Ulster's high king,  
 and little graves everywhere  
 — a famous tale, Derdriu.'

'Kill the child!' the warriors said.

'No,' Conchobor said. 'The girl will be taken away  
 tomorrow. I'll have her reared for me. This woman I'll  
 keep to myself.'

The men of Ulster didn't dare speak against him.

And so it was done. She was reared by Conchobor and  
 grew into the loveliest woman in all Ireland. She was  
 kept in a place set apart, so that no Ulsterman might see  
 her until she was ready for Conchobor's bed. No one was  
 allowed in the enclosure but her foster-father and her  
 foster-mother, and Leborcham, tall and crooked, a satirist,  
 who couldn't be kept out.

One day in winter, the girl's foster-father was skinning  
 a milk-fed calf on the snow outside, to cook it for her.  
 She saw a raven drinking the blood on the snow. She said  
 to Leborcham:

'I could desire a man who had those three colours  
 there: hair like the raven, cheeks like blood and his body  
 like snow.'

'Good luck and success to you!' Leborcham said. 'He  
 isn't too far away, but close at hand — Noisiu, Uisliu's  
 son.'

'I'll be ill in that case,' she said, 'until I see him.'

This man Noisiu was chanting by himself one time near Emain, on the rampart of the stronghold. The chanting of the sons of Uisliu was very sweet. Every cow or beast that heard it gave two thirds more milk. Any person hearing it was filled with peace and music. Their deeds in war were great also: if the whole province of Ulster came at them at once, they could put their three backs together and not be beaten, their parrying and defence were so fine. Besides this they were swift as hounds in the chase, killing the wild beasts in flight.

While Noisiu was out there alone, therefore, she slipped out quickly to him and made as though to pass him and not recognize him.

'That is a fine heifer going by,' he said.

'As well it might,' she said. 'The heifers grow big where there are no bulls.'

'You have the bull of this province all to yourself,' he said, 'the king of Ulster.'

'Of the two,' she said, 'I'd pick a game young bull like you.'

'You couldn't,' he said. 'There is Cathbad's prophecy.'

'Are you rejecting me?'

'I am,' he said.

Then she rushed at him and caught the two ears of his head.

'Two ears of shame and mockery,' she said, 'if you don't take me with you.'

'Woman, leave me alone!' he said.

'You will do it,' she said, binding him.

A shrill cry escaped him at that. The men of Ulster nearby, when they heard it, started up ready to kill. Uisliu's other sons went out to quieten their brother.

'What is wrong?' they said. 'Whatever it is, Ulstermen shouldn't kill each other for it.'

He told them what had happened.

'Evil will come of this,' the warriors said. 'But even so, you won't be shamed as long as we live. We can bring her with us to some other place. There's no king in Ireland who would deny us a welcome.'

They decided on that. They left that night, with three times fifty warriors and three times fifty women and the same of hounds and menials. Derdriu was among them, mingling with the rest.

They travelled about Ireland for a long time, under protection. Conchobor tried to destroy them often with ambushes and treachery. They went round southwestward from the red cataract at Es Ruaid, and to the promontory at Benn Etair, northeastward. But still the men of Ulster pursued them until they crossed the sea to the land of Alba.

They settled there in the waste places. When the mountain game failed them they turned to take the people's cattle. A day came when the people of Alba went out to destroy them. Then they offered themselves to the king of Alba, who accepted them among his people as hired soldiers. They set their houses on the green. They built their houses so that no one could see in at the girl in case there might be killing on her account.

It happened that a steward came looking around their house early one morning. He saw the couple sleeping. Then he went and woke the king:

'I never found a woman fit for you until today,' he said. 'There is a woman with Noisiu mac Uislenn who is fit for a king over the Western World. If you have Noisiu killed, you can have the woman to sleep with,' the steward said.

'No,' the king said, 'but go and ask her every day in secret.'

He did this, but every day he came she told Noisiu about it that night. Since nothing could be done with her, the sons of Uisliu were ordered into all kinds of traps and dangerous battles to have them killed. But they were so hard in the carnage that nothing came of it.

They tried her one last time. Then the men of Alba were called together to kill them. She told Noisiu this.

'Go away from here,' she said. 'If you don't leave here this night, you will be dead tomorrow.'

So they left that night and reached an island in the sea.

This news reached Ulster.

'Conchobor,' everyone said, 'it would be shameful if the sons of Uisliu fell in enemy lands by the fault of a bad woman. Better to forgive and protect them — to save their lives and let them come home — than for enemies to lay them low.'

'Let them come,' Conchobor said. 'Send for them, with guarantees of safety.'

This news was brought to them.

'It is welcome,' they said. 'We'll go if Fergus comes as a pledge of safety, and Dubthach and Conchobor's son Cormac.'

Then they went down with the messengers to the sea.

So they were brought back to Ireland. But Fergus was stopped through Conchobor's cunning. He was invited to a number of ale feasts and, by an old oath, couldn't refuse. The sons of Uisliu had sworn they would eat no food in Ireland until they ate Conchobor's food first, so they were bound to go on. Fiacha, Fergus's son, went on with them, while Fergus and Dubthach stayed behind. The sons of Uisliu came to the green at Emain. Eogan mac Durthacht, king of Fernmag, was there: he had

come to make peace with Conchobor, with whom he had long been at enmity. He had been chosen to kill them. Conchobor's hired soldiers gathered around him so that the sons of Uisliu couldn't reach him. They stood in the middle of the green. The women settled on the ramparts of Emain.

Eogan crossed the green with his men. Fergus's son came and stood at Noisiu's side. Eogan welcomed Noisiu with the hard thrust of a great spear that broke his back. Fergus's son grasped Noisiu in his two arms and pulled him down and threw himself across him, and Noisiu was finished off through Fergus's son's body. Then the slaughter broke out all over the green. No one left except by spike of spear or slash of sword. Derdriu was brought over to Conchobor and stood beside him with her hands bound at her back.

Fergus was told of this, and Dubthach and Cormac. They came at once and did mighty deeds. Dubthach killed Maine, Conchobor's son. Fiachna, son of Conchobor's daughter Fedelm, was killed with a single thrust. Fergus killed Traigthréan, Traiglethan's son, and his brother. Conchobor was outraged, and on a day soon afterward battle was joined between them, and three hundred among the men of Ulster fell. Before morning Dubthach had massacred the girls of Ulster and Fergus had burned Emain.

Then they went to Connacht, to Ailill and Medb — not that this was a home from home for Ulstermen, but that they knew these two would protect them. A full three thousand the exiles numbered. For sixteen years they made sure that weeping and trembling never died away in Ulster; there was weeping and trembling at their hands every single night.

She was kept a year by Conchobor. In that time she never gave one smile, nor took enough food or sleep, nor lifted up her head from her knees. If they sent musicians to her, she would say this following poem :

'Sweet in your sight the fiery stride  
of raiding men returned to Emain.  
More nobly strode the three proud  
sons of Uisliu toward their home :

Noisiu bearing the best mead  
— I would wash him by the fire —  
Ardán, with a stag or a boar,  
Anle, shouldering his load.

The son of Nes, battle-proud,  
drinks, you say, the choicest mead.  
Choicer still — a brimming sea —  
I have taken frequently.

Modest Noisiu would prepare  
a cooking-pit in the forest floor.  
Sweeter than than any meat  
the son of Uisliu's, honey-sweet.

Though for you the times are sweet  
with pipers and with trumpeters,  
I swear today I can't forget  
that I have known far sweeter airs.

Conchobor your king may take delight  
in pipers and in trumpeters  
— I have known a sweeter thing,  
the three sons' triumphant song.

Noisiu's voice a wave roar,  
a sweet sound to hear forever;  
Ardán's bright baritone;  
Anle, the hunter's, high tenor.

Noisiu : his grave-mound is made  
and mournfully accompanied.  
The highest hero — and I poured  
the deadly drink when he died.

His cropped gold fleece I loved,  
and fine form — a tall tree.  
Alas, I needn't watch today,  
nor wait for the son of Uisliu.

I loved the modest, mighty warrior,  
loved his fitting, firm desire,  
loved him at daybreak as he dressed  
by the margin of the forest.

Those blue eyes that melted women,  
and menaced enemies, I loved;  
then, with our forest journey done,  
his chanting through the dark woods.

I don't sleep now,  
nor redden my fingernails.  
What have I to do with welcomes?  
The son of Indel will not come.

I can't sleep,  
lying there half the night.  
These crowds — I am driven out of my mind.  
I can neither eat nor smile.

What use for welcome have I now  
with all these nobles crowding Emain?  
Comfortless, no peace nor joy,  
nor mansion nor pleasant ornament.'

If Conchobor tried to soothe her, she would chant this following poem :

'Conchobor, what are you thinking, you  
that piled up sorrow over woe?  
Truly, however long I live,  
I can't spare you much love.

The thing most dear to me in the world,  
the very thing I most loved,  
your harsh crime took from me.  
I won't see him till I die.

I feel his lack, wearily,  
the son of Uisliu. All I see —  
black boulders on fair flesh  
so bright once among the others.

Red-cheeked, sweet as the river-brink;  
red-lipped; brows beetle-black;  
pearly teeth gleaming bright  
with a noble snowy light.

His figure easiest to find,  
bright among Alba's fighting-men  
— a border made of red gold  
matched his handsome crimson cloak.

A soft multitude of jewels  
in the satin tunic — itself a jewel :  
for decoration, all told,  
fifty ounces of light gold.

He carried a gold-hilted sword  
and two javelins sharply tipped,  
a shield rimmed with yellow gold  
with a knob of silver at the middle.

Fergus did an injury  
bringing us over the great sea.  
How his deeds of valour shrank  
when he sold honour for a drink !

If all Ulster's warriors  
were gathered on this plain, Conchobor,  
I would gladly give them all  
for Noisiu, son of Uisliu.

Break my heart no more today.  
In a short while I'll be no more.  
Grief is heavier than the sea,  
if you were but wise, Conchobor.'

'What do you see that you hate most?' Conchobor said.  
'You, of course,' she said, 'and Eogan mac Durthacht !'  
'Go and live for a year with Eogan, then,' Conchobor  
said.

Then he sent her over to Eogan.

They set out the next day for the fair of Macha. She  
was behind Eogan in the chariot. She had sworn that two  
men alive in the world together would never have her.

'This is good, Derdriu,' Conchobor said. 'Between me and Eogan you are a sheep eyeing two rams.'

A big block of stone was in front of her. She let her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, and she was dead.

