

THE CATTLE SPOIL OF DAIRT.

BY THE BISHOP OF LIMERICK.

[The 'Cattle Spoil of Dairt' is one of a cycle of stories which group themselves round the 'Tain Bo Chuailgne,' or Cattle Spoil of Cuailgne, a tale which held a leading place in the romantic literature of ancient Ireland.

It may have been the good fortune of some of our readers to have met with a book entitled 'The Irish before the Conquest,' in which Mrs. Ferguson has given an analysis of the 'Tain,' and of other tales and poems belonging to the heroic period of Irish history; or they may have read the spirited poem in which Samuel Ferguson embodies the wild legend of the loss and recovery of the 'Tain' in the time of Guaire, the hospitable King of Connaught, in the sixth century. To these sources, or to the fuller information to be found in Professor O'Curry's lectures, we may for the present refer those who are anxious to know more than we have space now to relate of a narrative which in Irish legend holds about the same position as the story of the Argonauts does in Greek mythology. The 'Tain' and the tales connected with it if printed would form a series of ancient Irish romance of considerably greater extent than the Welsh Mabinogion; and though an element of fiction enters largely into their composition they contain in them an abundance of actual historical material.

Along with the supernatural agents who are introduced appear kings and chieftains in whatever histories have been handed down to us, and concerning whom these legendary tales bear a testimony so uniform as to prove that the names which we encounter in them stand for real persons, though we may still be allowed to entertain serious doubts as to the alleged dates of their exploits.

But even supposing that these characters and events be regarded as mythical, we may safely conclude that the general colouring and minor details of the pictures set before us are true to nature.

Most of what relates to the usages of everyday life, dress, manners, and institutions may be relied on as accurate. There is the more reason to believe this as these historical tales of plunders, courtships, battles, expeditions by sea and land, feasts, sieges, elopements, slaughters,

and tragical deaths, were carefully catalogued, and the recitation of them on public occasions in the presence of kings and chiefs was one of the qualifications of the higher grades of the literary order.

In point of antiquity they bear comparison with almost any of the extant romances of the Western nations. The 'Tain' itself appears to have been reduced to its present shape about the beginning of the seventh century, and a copy of it exists in a manuscript written in the middle of the twelfth.

Readers of the 'Dark Blue' with a fresh recollection of the Saga of Frithiof, admirably translated from the Icelandic by Mr. William Morris, cannot fail to observe how unlike is the ancient Irish romance to the Scandinavian Saga.

The difference is as great—and we ought to expect it to be as great—as that which we recognise in the national characters of the Teuton and the Celt.

If the Saga has more of homely truthfulness, of vigorous and continuous action, of sturdy common sense, and exact delineation of the various traits of human character, the ancient Irish romance displays imagination and pathos to a degree remarkable in so rude an age.

The short tale which follows—or at least the original of it—might have suggested some curious discussions concerning matters of archæology, topography, and philology, but I have thought it best for the present to allow it to be regarded from a purely literary point of view.

It cannot lay claim to any peculiar merit of style.

The narrative is in part obscure, and its conclusion so abrupt as to give rise to the conjecture that we are not in possession of the entire tale. It may be regarded, however, as a fair sample of this class of narrative.

It is also deserving of notice that its author has, with a few brief but happy touches, succeeded in giving a dramatic individuality to the characters introduced into his story.

In my translation from the Irish I have adhered as closely to the original as the difference of idiom between our language and the Celtic has permitted me.]

At this time, Eochaidh Beg, son of Cairpri King of Cliach, was dwelling at Dun Cuilli, in the country of Hy Cuannach. He had forty fostersons, of the sons of the kings and chieftains of Munster; and forty milch cows to feed his forty fostersons.

Now King Ailell and Queen Meavee sent messengers to him bidding him come and speak with them. 'I will go,' said he, 'in a week from this day.' So the messengers took back that answer.

And it came to pass, not long afterward, as Eochaidh was in his bed-chamber, that a maiden and a young champion appeared to him in a vision. 'Ye are welcome,' said Eochaidh.—'We have come from far for that greeting,' said the twain.—'I would we were neigh-

hours,' said Eochaidh.—'Our dwellings are not far apart,' said the maiden, 'though we do not see one another.'—'Where do ye dwell?' said Eochaidh.—'In Sidh¹ Chuile,' said she.—'Wherefore come ye to me?' asked Eochaidh.—'We come,' said she, 'to give thee counsel.'—'What counsel?' asked Eochaidh.—'As to what befitteth thine honour and thy name,' said the maiden, 'when thou goest into far countries as thou hast occasion. Thou must take along with thee a great company, and horses, goodly, wondrous, brought from foreign lands. For the appointment thou art about to keep, we deem that thy equipment should be better than ordinary.'—'What should be the number of our company,' said he.—'Thou must take fifty horsemen,' said she, 'with costly bridles for the horses, and thou shalt receive all these things from me to-morrow at dawn in thy courtyard. For thou shalt have fifty iron-gray horses with their bridles of gold and fifty suits of princely apparel. And let all thy fostersons go with thee. It is meet that we should help thee; for thou dost well defend our country and our land and our inheritance.' And when they had said this, the twain departed.

And when Eochaidh arose on the morrow, fifty iron-gray horses were seen standing in a row at the door of the court; and fifty purple cloaks braided with gold; and fifty shirts embroidered with thread of gold: and fifty golden rods with ferules of silver; and fifty white foals with red ears, and rolling eyes, and blue hoofs, and silver bits and curbs of brass.

Now all this was done by magic. And the people were amazed at this thing. And Eochaidh told his vision unto them.

And when that company went forth on their way to Cruachain, people were smothered in the press of those who thronged to see them; albeit the number of the company was not great; for they were a wondrous and beautiful sight; fifty champions all equipped alike as hath been already told.

'Who is this?' asked Ailell as the company drew near.—'I will tell thee,' said his servant. 'It is Eochaidh Beg, son of the King of Cliach.' Then the company were let into the fort and into the palace. They were made welcome, and abode there feasting three days and three nights.

Then said Eochaidh 'Wherefore am I summoned hither?'—'That I may ask a gift of thee,' said Ailell. 'We have to bear a grievous burden, the burden of feeding the men of Erin whilst they are harrying the cattle of Cualgne.'—'What gift dost thou desire?' said Eochaidh.—'A gift to us of milch cows,' said Ailell.—'The cows that I have are not more than I need,' said Eochaidh.—'I have forty fostersons with me of the sons of the kings and chieftains of

¹ The reader will observe that she was a Banshee, i.e. a woman, *bean*, of the fairy hills, *sidhe*.

Munster. There are forty cows to feed them, and I have seven score milch cows besides for their maintenance, and fifty more following these.'—'I ask,' said Ailell, 'a cow from every householder who is subject to thee. If it had chanced that the burden was on thee I would cheerfully have given thee relief.'—'It is well,' said Eochaidh, 'thou shalt have the cattle thou requirest.' Then they abode there three days and three nights, and after that they took leave of the King, and set forth for their own country.

And on the way Eochaidh was met by the three sons of Glaschu of Irros Domnann; seven score champions was the number of their company. They joined battle with him. It was at Insenacouchada in Meath that they met; and Eochaidh Beg the son of Cairpri fell there, and his forty fostersons along with him. When the tidings of these things were spread through the land of Erin, three hundred of the women of Munster died in mourning for the young men.

That night, as Ailell was asleep, he beheld a maiden and a young champion approach, the fairest he had ever seen. 'Whence come ye?' said Ailell, 'and what are your names?'—'We are Victory and Defeat,' said they.—'Victory is welcome and Defeat is unwelcome,' said Ailell.—'Thou shalt be victorious,' said the maiden, 'however it be. 'How near to us is that issue?' said Ailell.—'I will tell thee,' said she.—'Send on the morrow for a prey of cows to be brought thee from Dairt the daughter of Eochaidh. It is thine own son Orlam that thou must send. And go thou to gather a company to attend him.'—'With what number shall he go?' said Ailell.—'Let him have fifty horsemen,' said she, 'men of renown; and fifty of the young men of Connacht. Thou shalt have from me this day the same equipment as was provided for the young men that were killed yesterday; in horses, and bridles, and cloaks, and brooches, and in the number of each. Thou shalt receive all these things from me to-morrow at dawn in thy courtyard. Let us return to our own country now,' said she.

Then the twain went away immediately that same night to Corb Cliach Mac Taisigh of Munster, who dwelt in his court on the north bank of the Nemain, and they appeared unto him as he slept. 'Whence come ye?' said he, 'and what are your names?'—'Attack and Plunder,' said they.—'Attack is welcome and Plunder is unwelcome,' said Corb Cliach.—'Thou shalt not be plundered,' said the maiden, 'but thou shalt be attacked.'—'How shall that befall us?' said Corb Cliach.—'I will tell thee,' said the maiden. 'Thou shalt be attacked by the sons of kings and princes and chieftains.'—'Who are they?' said Corb Cliach.—'We will tell thee,' said the twain. 'All the noble youths that are in Connacht will come to carry off your cows after first killing thy young men. They will come to-morrow at evening to carry away from thee Dairt the daughter of Eochaidh. It is not in great numbers that they will come.'—'They shall be hindered by the protection of the men of Munster if they attempt the deed; and what

is their number?' asked Corb Cliach.—'Seven score champions,' said she: 'and they are seven score men mighty in battle. Now let us depart,' said she, 'that we may gather a host to meet them to-morrow in the evening.'

And on the morrow at early dawn the Connacht men went forth out of the court of Cruachain to the green, and there they beheld the horses and the bridles and the apparel, all as had been promised, at the door of the court, and the same as what they had seen with Eochaidh and the princes on the day before. Then Ailell's champions were in great doubt whether they would go or not. 'Twere a pity,' said he, 'to give up the chance of good fortune.'

Then Orlam went forth till he reached the house of Dairt the daughter of Eochaidh, in Cliu Clasaigh in Munster, on the south shore of the Shannon. There they unharnessed, and Dairt received him gladly. Three beeves were sent to them. 'We shall not need to dress them,' said Orlam. 'Let our men carry their food with them on horseback.' This was because they were in fear of the enemy, being in the heart of Munster. 'Wilt thou come away with me, O maiden?' said Orlam.—'I will go, indeed,' said the maiden: 'and take thou the cattle with thee.' Then Orlam and his company surrounded the cattle and carried them away, and the maiden with them.
