In the long time ago, Conchubar, son of Ness, was King of Ulster, and he held his court in the palace of Emain Macha. And this is the way he came to be King. He was but a young lad, and his father was not living, and Fergus, son of Rogh, who was at that time King of Ulster, asked his mother Ness in marriage.

Now Ness, that was at one time the quietest and kindest of the women of Ireland, had got to be unkind and treacherous because of an unkindness that had been done to her, and she planned to get the kingdom away from Fergus for her own son. So she said to Fergus, "Let Conchubar hold the kingdom for a year, so that his children after him may be called the children of a king; and that is the marriage portion I will ask of you."

"You may do that," the men of Ulster said to him; "for even though Conchubar gets the name of being king, it is yourself that will be our King all the time." So Fergus agreed to it, and he took Ness as his wife, and her son Conchubar was made King in his place.

But all through the year Ness was working to keep the kingdom for him, and she gave great presents to the chief men of Ulster to get them on her side. And though Conchubar was but a young lad at the time, he was wise in his judgments and brave in battle, and good in shape and in form, and they liked him well. And at the end of the year, when Fergus asked to have the kingship back again, they consulted together; and it is what they agreed, that Conchubar was to keep it. And they said, "It is little Fergus thinks about us, when he was so ready to give up his rule over us for a year; and let Conchubar keep the kingship," they said, "and let Fergus keep the wife he has got."

Now, it happened one day that Conchubar was making a feast at Emain Macha for the marriage of his sister Dechtire with Sualtim, son of Roig. And at the feast Dechtire was thirsty, and they gave her a cup of wine, and as she was drinking it a mayfly flew into the cup, and she drank it down with the wine. And presently she went into her sunny parlour, and her fifty maidens along with her, and she fell into a deep sleep. And in her sleep Lugh of the Long Hand appeared to her, and he said, "It is I myself was the mayfly that came to you in the cup, and it is with me you must come away now, and your fifty maidens along with you." And he put on them the appearance of a flock of birds, and they went with him southward till they came to Brugh na Boinne, the dwelling-place of the Sidhe. And no one at Emain Macha could get tale or tidings of them, or know where they had gone, or what had happened them.

It was about a year after that time there was another feast in Emain, and Conchubar and his chief men were sitting at the feast. And suddenly they saw from the window a great flock of birds, that lit on the ground and began to eat up everything before them, so that not so much as a blade of grass was left.

The men of Ulster were vexed when they saw the birds destroying all before them, and they yoked nine of their chariots to follow after them. Conchubar was in his own chariot, and there were following with him Fergus, son of Rogh, and
Laegaire Buadach the Battle-Winner, and Celthair, son of Uithecar, and many others, and Bricriu of the bitter tongue was along with them.

They followed after the birds across the whole country southward, across Slieve Fuad, by Ath Lethan, by Ath Garach and Magh Gossa, between Fir Rois and Fir Ardae; and the birds before them always. They were the most beautiful that had ever been seen; nine flocks of them there were, linked together two-and-two with a chain of silver, and at the head of every flock there were two birds of different colours, linked together with a chain of gold; and there were three birds that flew by themselves, and they all went before the chariots to the far end of the country, until the fall of night, and then there was no more seen of them.

And when the dark night was coming on, Conchubar said to his people, "It is best for us to unyoke the chariots now, and to look for some place where we can spend the night."

Then Fergus went forward to look for some place, and what he came to was a very small poor-looking house. A man and a woman were in it, and when they saw him they said, "Bring your companions here along with you, and they will be welcome." Fergus went back to his companions and told them what he had seen. But Bricriu said: "Where is the use of going into a house like that, with neither room nor provisions nor coverings in it; it is not worth our while to be going there."

Then Bricriu went on himself to the place where the house was. But when he came to it, what he saw was a grand, new, well-lighted house; and at the door there was a young man wearing armour, very tall and handsome and shining. And he said, "Come into the house, Bricriu; why are you looking about you?" And there was a young woman beside him, fine and noble, and with curled hair, and she said, "Surely there is a welcome before you from me." "Why does she welcome me?" said Bricriu. "It is on account of her that I myself welcome you," said the young man. "And is there no one missing from you at Emain?" he said. "There is, surely," said Bricriu. "We are missing fifty young girls for the length of a year." "Would you know them again if you saw them?" said the young man. "If I would not know them," said Bricriu, "it is because a year might make a change in them, so that I would not be sure." "Try and know them again," said the man, "for the fifty young girls are in this house, and this woman beside me is their mistress, Dechtire. It was they themselves, changed into birds, that went to Emain Macha to bring you here." Then Dechtire gave Bricriu a purple cloak with gold fringes; and he went back to find his companions. But while he was going he thought to himself, "Conchubar would give great treasure to find these fifty young girls again, and his sister along with them. I will not tell him I have found them. I will only say I have found a house with beautiful women in it, and no more than that."

When Conchubar saw Bricriu he asked news of him.

"What news do you bring back with you, Bricriu?" he said. "I came to a fine well-lighted house," said Bricriu; "I saw a queen, noble, kind, with royal looks, with curled hair; I saw a troop of women, beautiful, well dressed; I saw the man of the house, tall and open-handed and shining." "Let us go there for the night," said Conchubar. So they brought their chariots and their horses and their arms; and they were hardly in the house when every sort of food and of drink, some they knew and some they did not know, was put before them, so that they never spent a better night. And when they had eaten and drunk and began to be satisfied, Conchubar said to the young man, "Where is the mistress of the house that she does not come to bid us welcome?" "You cannot see her to-night," said he, "for she is in the pains of childbirth."

So they rested there that night, and in the morning Conchubar was the first to rise up; but he saw no more of the man of the house, and what he heard was the cry of a child. And he went to the room it came from, and there he saw Dechtire, and her maidens about her, and a young child beside her. And she bade Conchubar welcome, and she told him all that had happened her, and that she had called him there to bring herself and the child back to Emain Macha. And Conchubar said, "It is well you have done by me, Dechtire; you gave shelter to me and to my chariots; you kept the cold from my horses; you gave food to me and my people, and now you have given us this good gift. And let our sister, Finchoem, bring up the child," he said. "No, it is not for her to bring him up, it is for me," said Sencha, son of Ailell, chief judge and chief poet of Ulster. "For I am skilled; I am good in disputes; I am not forgetful; I speak before anyone
at all in the presence of the King; I watch over what he says; I give judgment in the quarrels of kings; I am judge of the men of Ulster; no one has a right to dispute my claim, but only Conchubar."

"If the child is given to me to bring up," said Blai, the distributor, "he will not suffer from want of care or from forgetfulness. It is my messages that do the will of Conchubar; I call up the fighting men from all Ireland; I am well able to provide for them for a week, or even for ten days; I settle their business and their disputes; I support their honour; I get satisfaction for their insults."

"You think too much of yourself," said Fergus. "It is I that will bring up the child; I am strong; I have knowledge; I am the King's messenger; no one can stand up against me in honour or riches; I am hardened to war and battles; I am a good craftsman; I am worthy to bring up the child. I am the protector of all the unhappy; the strong are afraid of me; I am the helper of the weak."

"If you will listen to me at last, now you are quiet," said Amergin, "I am able to bring up a child like a king. The people praise my honour, my bravery, my courage, my wisdom; they praise my good luck, my age, my speaking, my name, my courage, and my race. Though I am a fighter, I am a poet; I am worthy of the King's favour; I overcome all the men who fight from their chariots; I owe thanks to no one except Conchubar; I obey no one but the King."

Then Sencha said, "Let Finchoem keep the child until we come to Emain, and Morann, the judge, will settle the question when we are there."

So the men of Ulster set out for Emain, Finchoem having the child with her. And when they came there Morann gave his judgment. "It is for Conchubar," he said, "to help the child to a good name, for he is next of kin to him; let Sencha teach him words and speaking; let Fergus hold him on his knees; let Amergin be his tutor." And he said, "This child will be praised by all, by chariot drivers and fighters, by kings and by wise men; he shall be loved by many men; he will avenge all your wrongs; he will defend your fords; he will fight all your battles."

And so it was settled. And the child was left until he should come to sensible years with his mother Dechtire and with her husband Sualtim. And they brought him up upon the plain of Muirthemne, and the name he was known by was Setanta, son of Sualtim.

The Boyhood of Cuchulain

Dectera, one of the sisters of Conchubar Mac Nessa, married a prince whose patrimony lay along the shores of the Muirnict, and whose capital was Dun Dalgan. They had one child, a boy, whom they named Setanta.

As soon as Setanta was able to understand the stories and conversation of those around him, he evinced a passion for arms and the martial life, which was so premature and violent as to surprise all who knew him. His thoughts for ever ran on the wars and achievements of the Red Branch. He knew all the knights by name, the appearance and bearing of each, and what deeds of valour they had severally performed. Emain Macha, the capital of the Clanna Rury, was never out of his mind. He saw for ever before his mind its moats and ramparts, its gates and bridges, its streets filled with martial men, its high-raised Duns and Raths, its branching roads, over which came the tributes of wide Ulla to the High King. He had seen his father's tribute driven thither, and had even longed to be one of the four-footed beasts that he beheld wending their way to the wondrous city. But, above all, he delighted to be told of the great school where the young nobles of Ulster were taught martial exercises and the military art, under the superintendence of chosen knights and of the High King himself. Of the several knights he had his own opinion, and had already resolved to accept no one as his instructor save Fergus Mac Roy, tanist of Ulster.

Of his father he saw little. His mind had become impaired, and he was confined in a secluded part of the Dun. But whenever he spoke to Dectera of what was nearest his heart, and his desire to enter the military school at Emain Macha, she laughed, and said that he was not yet old enough to endure that rough life. But secretly she was alarmed, and
formed plans to detain him at home altogether. Then Setanta concealed his desire, but enquired narrowly concerning the partings of the roads on the way to Emania.

At last, when he was ten years old, selecting a favourable night, Setanta stole away from his father's Dun, and before morning had crossed the frontier. He then lay down to rest and sleep in a wood. After this he set out again, travelling quickly, lest he should be met by any of his father's people. On his back was strapped his little wooden shield, and by his side hung a sword of lath. He had brought his ball and hurle of red-bronze with him, and ran swiftly along the road, driving the ball before him, or throwing up his javelin into the air, and running to meet it ere it fell.

In the afternoon of that day Fergus Mac Roy and the King sat together in the part that surrounded the King's palace. A chessboard was between them, and their attention was fixed on the game.

At a distance the young nobles were at their sports, and the shouts of the boys and the clash of the metal hurles resounded in the evening air.

Suddenly, the noise ceased, and Fergus and the King looked up. They saw a strange boy rushing backwards and forwards through the crowd of young nobles, urging the ball in any direction that he pleased, as if in mockery, till none but the very best players attempted to stop him, while the rest stood about the ground in groups. Fergus and the King looked at each other for a moment in silence.

After this the boys came together into a group and held a council. Then commenced what seemed to be an attempt to force him out of the ground, followed by a furious fight. The strange boy seemed to be a very demon of war; with his little hurle grasped, like a war-mace, in both hands, he laid about him on every side, and the boys were tumbling fast. He sprang at tall youths, like a hound at a stag's throat. He rushed through crowds of his enemies like a hawk through a flock of birds. The boys, seized with a panic, cried out that it was one of the Tuatha from the fairy hills of the Boyne, and fled right and left to gain the shelter of the trees. Some of them, pursued by the stranger, ran round Conchubar Mac Nessa and his knight. The boy, however, running straight, sprang over the chess table; but Conchubar seized him deftly by the wrist and brought him to a stand, but with dilated eyes and panting.

"Why are you so enraged, my boy?" said the King, "and why do you so maltreat my nobles?"

"Because they have not treated me with the respect due to a stranger," replied the boy.

"Who are you yourself?" said Conchubar.

"I am Setanta, the son of Sualtim, and Dectera, your own sister, is my mother; and it is not before my uncle's palace that I should be insulted and dishonoured."

This was the debut and first martial exploit of the great Cuculain, type of Irish chivalry and courage, in the bardic firmament a bright and particular star of strength, daring, and glory, that will not set nor suffer aught but transient obfuscation till the extinction of the Irish race; Cuculain, bravest of the brave, whose glory affected even the temperate-minded Tierna, so that his sober pen has inscribed, in the annals of ancient Erin, this testimony: "Cuculain, filius Sualtam fortissimus heros Scotorum."

After this Setanta was regularly received into the military school, where, ere long, he became a favourite both with old and young. He placed himself under the tuition of Fergus Mac Roy, who, each day, grew more and more proud of his pupil, for while still a boy his fame was extending over Ulla.

It was not long after this that Setanta received the name by which he is more generally known. Culain was chief of the black country of Ulla, and of a people altogether given up to the making of weapons and armour, where the sound of the hammer and husky bellows were for ever heard. One day Conchubar and some of his knights, passing through the park to partake of an entertainment at the house of the armourer, paused awhile, looking at the boys at play. Then, as all were praising his little nephew, Conchubar called to him, and the boy came up, flushed and shy, for there were with the King the chief warriors of the Red Branch. But Conchubar bade him come with them to the feast, and the knights
around him laughed, and enumerated the good things which Culain had prepared for them. But when Setanta's brow fell, Conchubar bade him finish his game, and after that proceed to Culain's house, which was to the west of Emain Macha, and more than a mile distant from the city. Then the King and his knights went on to the feast, and Setanta returned joyfully to his game.

Now, when they were seen afar upon the plain the smith left his workshop and put by his implements, and having washed from him the sweat and smoke, made himself ready to receive his guests; but the evening fell as they were coming into the liss, and all his people came in also, and sat at the lower table, and the bridge was drawn up and the door was shut for the night, and the candles were lit in the high chamber.

Then said Culain, "Have all thy retinue come in, O Conchubar?" And when the King said that they were all there, Culain bade one of his apprentices go out and let loose the great mastiff that guarded the house. Now, this mastiff was as large as a calf and exceedingly fierce, and he guarded all the smith's property outside the house, and if anyone approached the house without beating on the gong, which was outside the foss and in front of the drawbridge, he was accustomed to rend him. Then the mastiff, having been let loose, careered three times round the liss, baying dreadfully, and after that remained quiet outside his kennel, guarding his master's property. But, inside, they devoted themselves to feasting and merriment, and there were many jests made concerning Culain, for he was wont to cause laughter to Conchubar Mac Nessa and his knights, yet he was good to his own people and faithful to the Crave Rue, and very ardent and skilful in the practice of his art. But as they were amusing themselves in this manner, eating and drinking, a deep growl came from without, as it were a note of warning, and after that one yet more savage; but where he sat in the champion's seat, Fergus Mac Roy struck the table with his hand and rose straightway, crying out, "It is Setanta." But ere the door could be opened they heard the boy's voice raised in anger and the fierce yelling of the dog, and a scuffling in the bawn of the liss. Then they rushed to the door in great fear, for they said that the boy was torn in pieces; but when the bolts were drawn back and they sprang forth, eager to save the boy's life, they found the dog dead, and Setanta standing over him with his hurle, for he had sprung over the foss, not fearing the dog. Forthwith, then, his tutor, Fergus Mac Roy, snatched him up on his shoulder, and returned with great joy into the banquet hall, where all were well pleased at the preservation of the boy, except Culain himself, who began to lament over the death of his dog and to enumerate all the services which he rendered to him.

"Do not grieve for thy dog, O Culain," said Setanta, from the shoulder of Fergus, "for I will perform those services for you myself until a dog equally good is procured to take the place of him I slew."

Then one jesting, said, "Cu-culain!" (Hound of Culain) and thenceforward he went by this name.

(The end)

Standish O'Grady's poem: Cuchulain Of Muirthemne

By Unknown