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*George Brandon Saul*

## WHAT CAME OF AN ARGUMENT

1

It was broad sunrise of a spring morning in that kingdom of Ireland known as Connacht, perhaps twenty centuries or more ago: one forgets. Blackbirds were talking and the good smell of turned earth was drifting into the bedroom of the royal palace at Cruachan. King Oilioll, a respectable—but not overly prepossessing—figure of a man, awoke with a great yawn. Watching him, his wife Medb had an impulse to stop it before the royal countenance was split from ear to ear. As the queen was never a woman to thwart an impulse, she reached over from her side of the bed and jabbed Oilioll in the ribs, snorting “What a mouth!”

“Eh, woman?” growled the king, his choked yawn needling his normally equable disposition. “Handsome is as handsome does. And you’ve got to admit I’ve done handsomely by you, my girl, whatever the size of my mouth!”

“I haven’t been complaining, have I?—But why boast about what you’ve ‘done’ for me?”

“Why not?—You’ve just admitted you’ve got no complaints, and you should realize that you’re wealthier as a result of marrying me than you ever were before.”

“Is that so, now!” snorted Medb, bristling. And raising herself on one elbow she added: “I had as much before marriage as I have now. Not that I *mightn’t* have had more if I’d taken one of my other suitors rather than you!”

"Ha, woman!—You're a modest creature!" suggested her husband sarcastically.

"I am not, then, and I don't wish to be!" flared Medb. "But you needn't pretend that I didn't have the pick of Erin before I chose you. After all, I was the best-looking of the High King's six daughters; I was the most generous; I was the wealthiest; and I was the ablest in battle and personal combat. It is natural that men should have always been attracted to me! I have never been out-tired in love-play; so every lover's pride has plagued him to renewed trial! I can melt a deeper hole in the snow than any other queen! And you know perfectly well that I turned down proposals from three kings before I accepted you as husband!"

"How ever did you bring yourself to accept me," grated Oilioll sarcastically, "considering your capacities and the fact that the very cream of Erin was offering itself to be poured into your cup?"

"I'll tell you, since you ask," snapped Medb, with a certain glint in her eyes. "I made up my mind as a girl that I would ask no bride-gift of whomever I should marry except certain qualities in the man himself; and those qualities were three: lack of jealousy, lack of fear, and lack of churlishness. For I myself am not jealous, and one man has followed another with me ever since I can remember, though a vigorous husband is always a convenience; I am personally fearless—and have proved it time and again on the battlefield; and I have always been openhanded and free in gift-giving. A man unable to match me in each of these respects would cut a pitiable figure beside me; and you were the only suitor of appropriate rank able to give me this triple bride-gift. I did not marry you to increase my possessions; I was as wealthy as you when I took you—and I still am!"

"Indeed, my girl!" sneered Oilioll haughtily. "Let me tell you I am the wealthiest person in all Erin!"

"Don't 'my girl' me!" raged Medb. "Prove your claim!"

In a remarkably short time the royal couple were seated on the lawn before the palace in their chairs of carven yew inlaid with red gold and precious stones. Then, at a signal from Oilioll, following a nod from Medb, servants began piling before each his personal possessions. Household utensils were placed side by side with thumb-rings and other jewelry; with garments in the seven colors traditionally allowed Irish royalty; with bronze-riveted, ash-handled spears and other instruments of battle. After these had been carefully counted and the totals recorded, the horses, sheep, swine, and cattle were driven in from pasture and woodland and similarly noted as to number, kind, and ownership.

In the end, Oilioll emerged one bull richer than Medb, though indeed only because that bull—a great fellow known as *Finnben-nach*, or "The White-Horned"—had chosen to leave Medb's herds for the king's, counting ownership by a woman beneath his dignity. Medb was furious in her disappointment. Having called a messenger, she ordered him to find out whether the "White Horned" could be matched by any bull in Erin. The messenger promptly replied that he knew of an even better animal—the Dun, or Brown, Bull of Cooley, owned by the Ulsterman Dare. Mac Fiachna.

The queen was imperative. "Go at once," she cried, "and ask to borrow the Dun for a year. And tell Dare that if he accedes, he shall not only have the Dun returned to him after the breeding, but be sent a bounty of fifty heifers in addition. And tell him, that if his countrymen oppose the loan, he himself shall come

with the bull to Connacht, where he will be given an estate equal in size to that he possesses in Ulster, a chariot worthy of a king, and my own most intimate favors!"

So an embassy to Dare was organized.

It was well received and the loan of the bull was granted. But alas for too lavish entertainment! Several members of the embassy got drunk on Dare's generous hospitality and foolishly began boasting that the bull would have gone to Connacht whether or not Dare had agreed! So Dare, in the anger of an injured host, sent the embassy packing.

"You can whistle for the bull so far as I am concerned!" said he.

Medb received the news of Dare's rejection with outward calm. But those who knew her best realized that it was at such times that she was most dangerous. In the present instance, she merely announced that the bull would be taken, assembled her armies, called in allies from Leinster and Munster, and headed for Ulster.

And that was the beginning of the great "Cattle-Raid of Cooley" recorded in legend, the war in which only the valor of the hero Cuchulainn saved the northern kingdom under attack.

2

Of the progress of Medb's invasion it is not my purpose to tell, since doing so would involve a long account of the history of Cuchulainn himself, which only an epic poet should undertake. Besides, I have forgotten some of the details. Enough to say that after months of bloody conflict Medb, though eventually driven back into Connacht with her defeated forces, managed to abduct

the Dun Bull and drive him to Cruachan. And that was no man's gain.

Why?

Not hard to tell the reason!

As soon as the Dun Bull felt the pastures of Connacht under his hooves, he stopped in his tracks and bellowed three great challenges across the countryside before him. And the "White-Horned" bull of King Oídhall heard and accepted the challenges, bellowing with equal loudness in return. Before long he had torn raging from the enclosures of Cruachan and was snorting defiance furiously into the face of the Dun.

For a few moments these monstrous animals stood looking at each other while memory poured hatred and poison into their blood; for in truth these were no ordinary bulls, but ancient enemies who for centuries had been fighting each other in one body-shape or another—as ravens, as sea-monsters, and so on—since contention first broke out between them when they were swine-herds to certain gods. This was a circumstance unknown to Medb or anyone else, but it was the real reason for what followed. And that is a story briefly told.

After frothing silently at each other for a short time, the two bulls began pawing the ground in preparation for their duel—and it was not long before the doors of all Connacht were being closed against the rain of flying clods veiling the sun. Then, with bellows that shook the nuts from hazel trees, the great antagonists rushed head-on at each other. The skull-crashing shock of that meeting was like the splitting of thunder over the countryside. It gave momentary pause to the contestants; then they tangled

horns and strained and roared until the people of Connacht must have thought the universe was in agony with their earth-shaking contention. All that day they struggled and fought, and by nightfall neither had been conquered.

They had unlocked horns and were breathing heavily in a brief respite from fighting, their eyes bright with murderous hatred still, when an Ulsterman serving in Queen Medb's host cast a mocking word at the Dun of Cooley to prick him to greater effort.

The taunt worked. Stung by the insult, the Dun rushed at his opponent with renewed passion; and that was the last the people of Connacht saw of the bulls until the next day. Not that the animals remained unheard, for their plunging and bellowing shook all Erin from dusk to dawn.

At daybreak the Dun of Cooley came ploughing portentuously over the western edge of Cruachan, great portions of his late opponent decorating his horns. With three bellows he crashed out of Connacht en route to his home in Ulster, stopping only once or twice to satisfy his thirst by exposing a river-bed. And those unfortunates who happened to get into his path never impeded any later traveller.

Arrived in his homeland, the Dun rose on his hind legs, leaned back monstrously against a hill; and pealed his bellowing triumph to all Ulster. But his exultation burst his heart, and the death-stream poured from his mouth.

In Cruachan Oilioll was grumbling to his wife.

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"A stupid, bloody, wasteful affair if ever there was one!—and all because of your bullheadedness!"

Medb smiled placidly.

"At least we are now equal in wealth," she observed.