

The Ulster Cycle: "Cuchulain's Fight with Ferdia"

Cuchulainn and Ferdia's Fight at the Ford

MEDB was the proud and headstrong queen of Connacht and her husband was called Aillil. As the couple lay in bed one night, their pillow talk turned to the wealth they both had. They argued about which of them was the richest. They compared their lands, their dwellings, their furnishings, their precious vessels, their jewellery, their clothes, their flocks of sheep and their herds of cattle. All these things were matched and measured and found to be equal except for one thing: in Aillil's herd there was a magnificent bull called the White-Horned and Medb had none to touch it. When she heard that an Ulster chieftain called Daire, had a bull as powerful and majestic as Aillil's, Medb was determined to get the bull and bring it back to graze with her own herd in Cruachan. She sent her messengers to Ulster to negotiate with Daire about acquiring his bull, the Brown Bull of Cooley, but the man would not part with it and when diplomacy failed Medb decided to make a raid on Ulster and take the animal by force. She called the kings of the other parts of Ireland to help her invade the province, and troops from Leinster and Munster went to Connacht to join forces with her. Fergus Mac Roi, the powerful Red Branch warrior, sided with Medb as well. Though he was an Ulsterman he had become an enemy of Conor Mac Nessa's because of the king's cruel and treacherous treatment of Deirdre and the sons of Usnach.

A great army of the men of Ireland assembled at Cruachan ready to march on Ulster and capture for Medb the Brown Bull of Cooley. The queen herself took command of the army, and Fergus, who knew the territory and the route to Ulster, was chosen as the chief scout and guide. Medb waited until Macha's curse had come on the Red Branch warriors and they were stricken by birth pangs, and lay helpless as infants or women in childbirth. Then she moved against Ulster.

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But one Ulster warrior was immune to this weakness and that was Cuchulainn. Because his father was Lugh of the Tuatha De Danaan, Macha's curse did not affect him. Cuchulainn was still only seventeen as Medb's army began the Cattle Raid of Cooley, but he was already one of the greatest warriors of the Red Branch. Even in childhood his courage and ferocity were famous. Later, as a youth he had gone to Scotland and had learnt special secret battle skills from Scathach, the fierce woman warrior of Skye. Thus it fell to Cuchulainn to defend the province of Ulster on his own. For three months, single-handed, he harried the men of Ireland as he waited for Conor Mac Nessa and the Red Branch heroes to be freed from Macha's throes.

As Medb's scouts made incursions into Ulster, Cuchulainn stalked them and beheaded them. When she sent companies of soldiers against him, he defeated them, slaughtering as many as a hundred a day, and when she sent her greatest champions to meet him in single combat at the ford, he killed them one by one.

The men of Ireland had a meeting to decide who would go out to the ford next and fight Cuchulainn since he had killed so many of their champions already. They agreed unanimously that Ferdia, the son of Daman, was the only one strong and brave enough to face Cuchulainn. He had been trained in arms with Cuchulainn in Scathach's camp, so he knew the same secret tactics. They were perfectly matched in battle except for one thing; Cuchulainn had the Gae Bolga, the deadly weapon that Scathach had given him. This spear was cast with the foot and never missed its mark. When the point entered its target it opened out into thirty barbs, that invaded the whole body, tearing and pulling at the flesh. It could not be pulled out so the victim's body had to be cut open to remove it. Though Ferdia had no weapon to match the Gae Bolga, he had a special horn-skin that no spear could pierce.

Medb sent her messengers to Ferdia in his camp telling him to come and meet her and her commanders. But Ferdia did not want to fight Cuchulainn. He and Cuchulainn had been companions-in-arms. They had defended each other in times of danger and they loved each other like brothers. They were foster brothers, one of the

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strongest ties of all. Although message after message was sent to him, Ferdia refused to go to see Medb for he knew what she wanted him to do. So Medb sent her druids and her poets to mock him and blame him and to disgrace him in satirical poems and spells. In the end Ferdia agreed to go with them to see Medb and Aillil for he preferred to die with honour and courage in battle than to fall victim to the abuse and derision of the satirists.

When he arrived in their tent he was greeted rapturously by the king and queen. They threw a feast in his honour and all the leaders of the men of Ireland were present. Finnabair, the beautiful, fair-haired daughter of Medb and Aillil sat beside Ferdia and poured great quantities of liquor into his goblet, kissing him each time she filled the cup. She whispered in his ear that he was her darling and of all the men alive he was the chosen one, the only one she loved.

Ferdia was flattered by the attentions of the king's lovely daughter and was happy to be the guest of honour. He soon became drunk and merry and forgot why he had been summoned to the royal quarters. Then Medb spoke.

'Do you know why we sent for you, Ferdia?' she asked.

'I assume I'm here because all the other champions are here,' Ferdia replied, 'for I'm as good as they are!'

'We know you're the *best* champion we have!' Medb said. 'And so we've chosen you to meet Cuchulainn.'

When he heard this, Ferdia's happiness melted like snow off a ditch and he told Medb he would not fight his friend. Medb pressed him again and again to meet Cuchulainn but he would not. Then she offered him great rewards.

'You can have priceless chariots and the swiftest horses and enough tackle and harness for a dozen man if you will agree to fight Cuchulainn at the ford,' Medb promised. Ferdia refused.

'I will give you a tract of land in Connacht as big as the Plain of Muirthemne,' Medb said. 'And you and your family can live in my court in Cruachan for the rest of your lives, free from taxes, and the best of food and drink supplied! And take this,' she said, unpinning a leaf-shaped brooch from her cloak. 'Feel how heavy it is, how beautiful it is! It's made of solid gold!'

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But Ferdia steadfastly refused to fight Cuchulainn.

'You can have Finnabair, my daughter for your wife,' Medb pleaded, 'and *my* love for life if you go to the ford. You can have anything you want for you are a great warrior and you alone are equal to Cuchulainn'

'Medb, you're powerful and persuasive but I will not be bribed. If you offered me the sun and the moon still I would not fight Cuchulainn at the ford. Only disaster would come from our meeting. He is a great warrior, greater than me though we trained together and fought together. He is the Hound of Ulster, a fierce fighter, and I would rather fight two hundred men than him. One of us must die if we meet and if I killed my foster brother, I would turn back and kill *you*, Medb, and all your followers!'

But Medb, who knew better than most how to stir up trouble, tried another trick. Ignoring Ferdia's outcry she turned to the assembled company. 'What Cuchulainn said was right after all!' she exclaimed.

'What did Cuchulainn say?' Ferdia demanded angrily.

'He said it would come as no surprise to him if he overcame you in a fight wherever or whenever you would meet.'

'He had no right to say that!' Ferdia burst out. 'For he knows me well enough to know I'm a good fighter and that I'm not afraid to fight and never have been. I wouldn't degrade him like that, so tomorrow morning to save my good name I'll be the first man out and in front of you all, I'll fight Cuchulainn!'

Medb was pleased when Ferdia shouted out this promise and all the other warriors there as witnesses.

'I knew you were no coward,' she said, 'and you're sure to win. It's right that you, like Cuchulainn, should put your loyalty to your country above friendship.'

Among the men of Ireland who witnessed all this was Fergus Mac Roi, the Red Branch leader who had fled from Emain Macha and joined forces with Medb after avenging the deaths of the sons of Usnach. Fergus was one of Cuchulainn's foster fathers and he loved him like a son. He was dismayed as he watched Medb trick Ferdia into going to the ford to meet Cuchulainn and he left the

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assembly and went back to his own camp and told his companions of his fears for Cuchulainn. He knew that Ferdia was the one man who could match Cuchulainn's fighting skills and he knew too that Ferdia was hungry for battle now that he had been goaded by Medb's lies and taunts.

'Go and warn Cuchulainn that there's danger in store for him tomorrow,' he told his messengers. 'Tell him that his foster brother is coming out to fight him. Try to persuade him not to come to the ford tomorrow morning!'

'Fergus, even if you were at the ford yourself we'd be afraid to go near Cuchulainn and give him a message of that sort!' they protested.

'I'll go myself then,' said Fergus. 'Get the horses and chariots ready!'

Fergus took his huge curved shield, his silver spear and his sword in its scabbard of chased silver and stepped into his magnificent chariot. As he approached the river, the copper chariot and the shining weapons flashed in the evening sun. Laeg, Cuchulainn's charioteer and faithful guard, saw the light in the distance and told Cuchulainn about the splendid warrior who was approaching.

'It's not hard to say who *that* is,' said Cuchulainn. 'It could be no one else but Fergus, my foster father, who has come out here to warn me about the battle against all the men of Ireland!'

At the ford, Fergus got out of his chariot and Cuchulainn greeted him.

'You're welcome here, Fergus my friend! If I could, I would prepare a hero's feast for you of fish and waterfowl, a salad of cress and seaweed, and a drink of cold water.'

'That's the meal of an outlaw!' said Fergus.

'It is indeed,' said Cuchulainn. 'That's what I have become.'

'I didn't come here for hospitality,' said Fergus. 'I came to tell you who is coming to fight you tomorrow morning.'

'Tell me who is that?' asked Cuchulainn.

'I'll tell you,' said Fergus. 'It's your friend Ferdia who's coming to the ford. Your foster brother, your brother-in-arms, your equal in courage and skill.'

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'As sure as I live it's an encounter I dread,' Cuchulainn cried, 'not because I *fear* Ferdia, but because I *love* him. I would almost rather he killed me than that I killed him!'

'For that very reason be on your guard! You have every reason to fear Ferdia. He is by far the greatest warrior you have met so far in this war, and the greatest you will ever meet. He is as skilled as you are. Moreover he has his horn-skin protection and when he fights no weapon can pierce it. He is as ferocious now as a lion and he will overwhelm you like a tidal wave!'

'Don't say that!' Cuchulainn said. 'For I swear in the name of my tribe, the people I am defending at the ford, that I will overcome Ferdia. I will pierce him as if he was a rush softened by river water. For months now, on my own, I have faced the onslaught of the four provinces of Ireland without once stepping back, and I assure you I will not step back now!'

'I hope with all my heart that it will turn out like that,' said Fergus. 'Though I joined Medb's forces because of Conor's treachery, I want you to win, Cuchulainn, but the fight will be hard and bitter!'

Then Cuchulainn embraced Fergus and thanked him for coming to warn him and Fergus returned to Medb's camp. When Fergus had gone Laeg turned to Cuchulainn.

'What will you do tonight?' he asked him.

'What indeed!' said Cuchulainn.

'I'll tell you,' said Laeg. 'Tomorrow Ferdia will come to the ford to attack you. He will be bathed and rested, his hair will be plaited and dressed and he will have a great crowd of Medb's followers with him to be spectators at the fight. So you should go to your wife, Emer and let her make you ready for battle so that tomorrow you'll present yourself to him as well groomed and ready as he.'

Cuchulainn took Laeg's advice and went to Emer's house to spend the night.

As for Ferdia, when his outburst was over he left the feast and went back to his tent to tell his companions how he had promised to fight Cuchulainn the next morning and to show them the favours he had got in return. His friends were dismayed at this news. They

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knew that when the two greatest champions in Ireland met, one or both of them would die. They had seen the fearful work that Cuchulainn had done in the past months and in their hearts they were afraid that it would be Ferdia who would fall.

Ferdia, still half drunk from the feast, slept heavily for the first part of the night but woke up early, anxious and frightened at the promise he had made and the thought of the battle ahead of him. He was afraid that after he had faced Cuchulainn, whatever the outcome, his life would not be his own. His charioteer was frightened as well and advised Ferdia not to go to the ford.

'Keep quiet!' Ferdia snapped. 'I made a promise in front of all the men of Ireland that I would fight Cuchulainn, and I must keep my word. To tell you the truth I would almost rather he killed me than that I killed him!'

Then Ferdia tried to comfort and encourage his charioteer by describing how he would overcome Cuchulainn in battle and they set off for the ford.

When they arrived there dawn had not yet broken so Ferdia tried to get some more sleep. 'Make a bed for me in the chariot,' he said, 'and I'll try to get back to sleep, for I got little enough last night.' So the servant unyoked the horses and made a bed for his master and Ferdia slept fitfully till dawn.

The sun was well risen when Cuchulainn arrived at the ford. He waited till then for he did not want the men of Ireland to think that fear had woken him early. When it was broad daylight he ordered Laeg to harness the horses and yoke them to his chariot. 'Hurry up, Laeg,' he said, 'for the man who is waiting for us has been up a long time!'

Then Cuchulainn, the champion of the Ulstermen, and Laeg, his skilful charioteer, got into the chariot and set off for the ford. As they sped along, the air around Cuchulainn's head shrieked with the war cries of the Tuatha De Danaan. When he set out to fight, these war demons rallied round their kinsman, striking even greater terror into the minds of his opponents who were terrified already by his fearsome reputation.

As he clattered towards the ford, the uproar around his chariot

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was tumultuous. Shields clashed, spears rattled, swords thudded and armour clanged. The ropes strained and hissed, the wheels rumbled and the chariot creaked. The thunder of the horses' hoofs and Cuchulainn's deep loud voice vibrated in the clamorous air around his head.

Ferdia's charioteer heard the tumult and ran to wake his master. He shook him and said, 'Ferdia, rise up at once! They are coming to meet you at the ford. I hear the sound of a silver-yoked chariot. It is driven by a reckless charioteer and in it there is a tall warrior. He is coming fast down the road, he is heading for victory. It is that fierce fighter, the Hound of Ulster, who is galloping southwards, swift as a hawk. He comes bloodstained from battles to do battle again! I pity the man who has to meet Cuchulainn. I knew it in my bones, I foretold it, that some day we'd meet him in battle. Now I hear him and he hears us. It is Cuchulainn, the Hound of Emain, the defender of Ulster!'

'Stop praising Cuchulainn,' Ferdia said, 'and help *me* now! Get ready my weapons. I'll soon lower his pride and his triumph. Others may have failed but I'll succeed!'

Cuchulainn arrived at the north side of the ford and stopped. Ferdia faced him from the opposite bank.

'You're welcome, Cuchulainn!' shouted Ferdia.

'I don't trust your welcome any more!' Cuchulainn shouted back. 'And anyway, Ferdia, it is for *me* to welcome *you*. Not the other way round. After all it is you who has come to the borders of my homeland to challenge me. I should be doing the challenging! You have driven away our women and children, our horses and herds!'

'What brought you here to fight me?' Ferdia shouted. 'Don't forget that when we were together in Scathach's place you were my serving man. You sharpened my weapons and made my bed for me.'

'True enough!' Cuchulainn yelled back. But that was then. Things have changed now. I was only a strip of a boy then. Young and small. That's why I was your servant. Today there is not a warrior anywhere who can match me!'

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'Foolish, rash Cuchulainn! What bad luck brought you here?' Ferdia lamented.

'You'll be lucky to see home again,' Cuchulainn roared. 'I'll cut you till you reek with blood. I'll fell you. You'll die trying to defend yourself. You're facing your doom at this ford, and at the hands of a great champion!'

'Stop boasting, Cuchulainn,' said Ferdia. 'Before morning your head will be on the point of my spear!'

'Oh, Ferdia,' said Cuchulainn, 'when we were at Scathach's we set out together to face all sorts of dangers. You were my companion, dearer to me than any brother. We shared the same bed. I'll miss you! You shouldn't have come to challenge me here because of false promises. Medb has promised you Finnabair, but you will never have her. She's been promised to fifty men before you and she's destroyed them all. They died at my hands, and you will too, Ferdia!'

'That's enough talk,' said Ferdia. 'Choose the weapons we're going to fight with today.'

'You make the choice,' said Cuchulainn. 'You were here first.'

'Do you remember the throwing feats we learnt at Scathach's?'

'I do,' said Cuchulainn. 'They were the last feats we practised.'

'Then they'll be the first feats we use today,' said Ferdia.

They both lifted their small, sharp-edged throwing shields, their small ivory-handled swords and their light ivory darts. All morning they skimmed the shields and cast the spears at each other and the small darts hummed through the air like bees on a sunny day. But skilfully as they threw just as skilfully they parried and the weapons were blunted against their long shields.

'No one will win at this,' said Ferdia. 'What will we use now?'

'It's still your choice till nightfall,' Cuchulainn replied. 'You were the first at the ford.'

'Well then,' said Ferdia, 'we'll take our heavy javelins and fight with them.'

They hurled the javelins at each other till nightfall but skilfully as they parried just as skilfully they threw and they wounded each other until they bled.

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'We'll stop, Cuchulainn,' said Ferdia.

'I agree,' said Cuchulainn.

They tossed their weapons to their charioteers who caught them and took them away. Then Cuchulainn and Ferdia waded into the middle of the ford to greet each other. They put their arms around each other's neck and kissed three times in acknowledgement of their friendship. Then the two warriors went back to their own side of the river and lay down on the beds of rushes that their charioteers had made for them. The physicians and healers came to dress their wounds with herbs and potions. For every herb and healing plant that was applied to Cuchulainn's gashes, the same amount was sent across the ford to Ferdia so that none of the men of Ireland could say that Cuchulainn had won because of his advantages in the matter of healing.

In the same way half of the food and refreshing drinks that were brought to Ferdia was sent across the ford to Cuchulainn, for only a small band of dwellers on Breg Plain supplied Cuchulainn with food, while Ferdia had the four provinces of Ireland providing for him. That night the horses of both warriors grazed in the same paddock and their charioteers sat round the same campfire.

Next morning Cuchulainn and Ferdia went to the ford to start fighting again.

'Your choice of weapons today, Cuchulainn,' said Ferdia.

'Since we had no decisive win from casting our weapons yesterday we'll use spears today and come closer,' said Cuchulainn. 'Maybe the thrusting of spears will decide between us.'

They buckled on their broad shields and moved closer to each other, gripping their spears. They lunged at each other, driving the spears past their shields, finding their mark all day long till by nightfall the holes in their bodies were so big that birds could have flown through them, carrying blood and loosened flesh into the air.

When the long day was over and evening came at last, the charioteers and horses were weary and the champions were exhausted.

'Let us stop now, Ferdia. If our horses and men are as spent as this, what about ourselves?'

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Ferdia agreed and they both threw aside their weapons and their charioteers caught them. They put their arms around each other and embraced. Their horses were led to the same paddock and their exhausted charioteers slept round the same fire. That night the physicians and healers came to minister to the warriors but their injuries were so great that no herbal dressing or healing plant, no potion or ointment could close the wounds or staunch the blood. Instead, they used charms and spells and incantations. Half of these were sent across the ford to Ferdia and in return Cuchulainn got half the food that the men of Ireland had brought to Ferdia as a mark of their respect.

The next morning, as they approached the ford, Cuchulainn noticed that Ferdia had changed. His hair had become darker, his eyes were dull and listless and he seemed weaker in his movements. Cuchulainn was full of pity for his friend.

'Oh, Ferdia,' he called across the water, 'if this is the state you're in, you're doomed! You should never have come here for Medb or Finnabair's sake. You'll bring about your own death.'

'We all die in the end,' Ferdia called back, 'no matter how brave and proud in battle we may be. But I must fight you, foster brother, or lose my good name throughout Ireland. Don't blame yourself for my death, Cuchulainn. Medb, not you, betrayed me.'

'My heart is tight, the blood runs cold at having to fight you in this state, my friend,' Cuchulainn said.

'No matter,' said Ferdia. 'I'll fight you anyway. What weapons will we use?'

'Your choice,' said Cuchulainn.

'Very well,' said Ferdia, 'we'll use our swords today. Maybe that will bring an end to this.'

So they took up their full-length shields and their heavy hard-hitting swords and they raced at each other. They hewed and hacked and sliced until lumps of flesh as big as a child's head flew into the air from their shoulders and thighs. So it went on all day until Ferdia called a halt. This time there was no embrace. They staggered wearily away from each other, sad and despondent. Their charioteers sat at separate fires that night and their horses were penned in different fields.

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Next morning Ferdia rose early. He knew that today the battle would be won or lost and he came alone to the ford. He put on his richest battle gear. Next to his skin he wore a silk tunic edged in gold. Over that he buckled an apron of pliant brown leather and on top of that again he hung a stone as big as a milestone. Over all he put a strong iron apron to protect him from the Gae Bolga. On his head he placed his crested helmet, enamelled and jewelled with rubies, crystals and amethysts. He carried a strong sharp spear in his right hand and in his left, a curved gold-hilted sword. Across his back he slung a huge shield deeply engraved round a great gold central boss. Then he started to leap and dance through the air doing marvellous turns with his weapons. He performed miraculous, perilous feats that no one had taught him, not even Scathach or the other champions who had fostered him, stupendous tricks that he had invented on the spur of the moment as he screwed up his courage to fight Cuchulainn.

The Ulster champion arrived at the ford in the middle of this display. He watched Ferdia's gymnastic leaps, his fierce play with his weapons, his amazing demonstrations of balance and strength and he said to Laeg, 'Now you can see what I'm up against! These thrilling moves of Ferdia's could defeat me, so taunt me and mock me if you see me falter; then my battle frenzy will fuel my anger. If I'm winning, praise me and encourage me, in case pity for Ferdia should make me lose heart!'

'I'll do as you say, Cuchulainn,' said Laeg.

Then Cuchulainn put on his battle gear and as Ferdia watched across the ford he too performed thrilling acrobatic leaps and manoeuvres that he had not learnt from Scathach or anyone else but rose out of the exultation of the moment. Ferdia watched these feats and feints and knew that before the day was over they would be turned on him.

'What weapons, Cuchulainn?' he asked.

'We'll use the feats of the ford today,' said Cuchulainn.

When Ferdia heard this his heart was heavy for he knew it was by these feats that Cuchulainn had defeated all his enemies.

A furious combat began, a struggle between the two great

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champions of Ireland, two battle-hardened, fierce warriors, heroes in both their camps.

At first they stayed apart and hurled spears and darts at each other across the ford. By midday they were both inflamed by the fight and as the battle fury rose in them, they moved closer for hand-to-hand combat. Cuchulainn sprang to the boss of Ferdia's shield to strike him from above. Ferdia gave the shield a mighty heave with his forearm and set Cuchulainn spinning like a stunned bird to the bank of the ford. Again Cuchulainn leapt from the bank to the boss of the shield to reach over the rim and strike at Ferdia's head. With one thrust of his knee, Ferdia tossed him off the shield as if he were a baby.

Laeg saw that Cuchulainn was in trouble.

'What's this, Cuchulainn! Ferdia has tossed you in the air like a mother tossing her baby. He has flung you away from him like water out of a cup. He has drilled through you like an awl through wood. He has tied you up in knots like a creeper choking a tree. He has dropped on you like a hawk on a sparrow. You're grist to his mill. From now on you can make no claims as a fighter, you spoilt little sham!'

Wild with rage at Laeg's taunts and Ferdia's mastery, Cuchulainn sprang into the air with the speed of a swallow in flight and lit on the boss of Ferdia's shield for the third time. Ferdia gave the shield a strong, disdainful shake as though nothing had landed on it and flung Cuchulainn backwards again across the ford.

Then Cuchulainn's war warp contorted him. He swelled up in his spasm like a huge bladder full of wind. He changed colour and his face became mottled and distorted. He arched his deformed body like a grotesque bow and towered over Ferdia, huge and terrifying as a Fomorian giant.

They began to fight. Their foreheads met above and their feet met below and their hands met in the middle, hacking and stabbing at each other over their shields. They fought so closely that their shields split with the impact. They fought so closely that their spearheads bent in their staves and the rivets burst out. They fought so closely that demons shrieked from the hilts of their swords

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and the points of their spears and the rims of their shields. They fought so closely that their trampling feet forced the river off its course. The riverbed became dry enough to sleep in and the only water that fell round them poured from the combatants themselves. The battle was so intense that the chariot horses reared in a frenzy and bolted, ripping free from their chains and tearing their traces apart. The struggle was so tumultuous that there was panic in the camp of the men of Ireland. The camp followers, the women and children, the old, the weak and the mad were crazed with fear and broke headlong out of the stockade and fled southwestward for Connacht.

Then Ferdia found a gap in Cuchulainn's defence and thrust his sword into his chest. Blood spouted from the wound, and the fighters at the ford slithered in the blood. Ferdia struck again and again until Cuchulainn could bear the thrusts no longer and he yelled at Laeg to get the Gae Bolga. Ferdia heard the name of the weapon he dreaded and he dropped his shield to protect his lower body. As he did so Cuchulainn cast his spear at Ferdia's chest and it went through his heart and halfway out of his back.

Laeg hurled the Gae Bolga downstream to Cuchulainn and he caught it with his foot. Ferdia thrust up his shield to protect his chest but it was too late. The Gae Bolga cast from Cuchulainn's foot smashed through the iron apron and split the huge stone under it into three parts. It drove into Ferdia's belly and the barbs opened out, filling every crevice and cavity of his body.

'You're killed me with that, Cuchulainn!' Ferdia cried out. 'My ribs have been shattered and my heart has burst. It was treachery that brought me here but it was *you* who killed me. My blood is on your hands!'

Cuchulainn ran towards Ferdia and caught him as he fell. He carried him and all his gear across the ford so that he would die on his territory and not on Medb's. He laid Ferdia down on the ground and collapsed beside him. He lay in a faint beside Ferdia's head, overcome with grief.

Laeg saw Cuchulainn lying prone and so did Cuchulainn's forces. They fell into battle formation and as they prepared to attack, Laeg

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ran up to Cuchulainn and shook him back to his senses. 'Get up, Cu!' he shouted. 'Get up! The men of Ireland are preparing to attack. Rise up or they will kill you!'

'Oh, Laeg, why should I bother to rise? Why should I bother, now that Ferdia is dead?' came the response.

Laeg begged and pleaded with his master, but Cuchulainn would not listen to him nor answer him. Instead, he bent over his dead friend, talking as if he were still able to hear. 'Oh Ferdia, if only you had listened to the pleading of your friends! If only you had taken their advice! They reminded you of our friendship. They warned you about this battle. They knew I would beat you. You should have listened to them. You were my dearest comrade, Ferdia. Ever since our time together at Scathach's you have been my truest friend, the companion I loved most. You were the handsomest lad, the bravest soldier, the best fighter that I ever met. I thought our friendship would never end. And that it should end like this! You, killed, and I your killer. And that I should have to live on! Not since I killed Connla, my own and Aoife's son, have I felt such despair!' Staring into Ferdia's face and rocking with grief Cuchulainn lamented and mourned his friend and cursed the futility of the fight. At last Laeg stepped in to strip Ferdia of his armour. He found Cuchulainn's brooch pinned to his tunic and handed it to Cuchulainn.

'So this is what he fought for!' Cuchulainn said bitterly. '*This* and Finnabair's false promise. Dear friend, it was a futile, fruitless meeting. And it was an unequal fight!'

Then Laeg cut Ferdia open to take back the Gae Bolga and when Cuchulainn saw his weapon covered in Ferdia's blood, he was overcome once more. He sobbed bitterly for Ferdia and made for him a litany of love and loss.

At last Laeg made himself heard. 'We must go now, CuCu!' he said. 'We must leave the ford at once.'

'Yes, we'll go now, Laeg, and leave our friend here. But I tell you, every battle, every struggle I ever had was like a child's carefree game compared to this fight with Ferdia at the ford.'