

Bricrui's Feast

Part One

By David K. McDonnell from a story in the Ulster Cycle

The Red Branch are warriors pledged to defend Ulster during time Connor was king of Ulster. They were indeed the best and the bravest of the Ulster warriors. The most well-known of these warriors is, of course, Cú Chulainn¹. Although Cú Chulainn is the best known, it was not always so. Indeed, there was a time in which many warriors of the Red Branch could claim, with some validity, to be the best of the Red Branch.

This is a story about challenges given to three of the Red Branch warriors to determine the champion among them all.

The contest started with Bricrui's innocent invitation. Bricrui was an elder in a minor Ulster clan, most known for his sharpened tongue. He was not very well liked or respected. Yet he built a lavish castle home, way above his station in life. This was likened by others as dressing a pig in fine clothing.

In order to show off his new castle, Bricrui planned a huge feast. He wanted to invite everyone on the "A" list to attend, including King Connor, the king's entourage, the Red Branch warriors, and all of the leading elders of his clan and the neighboring clans.

Bricrui traveled to the home of King Connor, who, coincidentally, was having his own elaborate feast. Ulster's most notable people were there, including the warriors of the Red Branch. Indeed, everyone Bricrui planned to invite to his own feast were present at the feast of King Connor.

Bricrui was surprised to see such a feast in progress, since he hadn't received the memo. He soon found himself not only not invited, but not welcome at all. King Connor was indeed quite perturbed at Bricrui's appearance at the feast.

¹ Pronounced "Coo- HULL-an"

But the king was also an honorable man, and it would be exceedingly dishonorable for him to send Bricrui away. So, he reluctantly asked Bricrui in to celebrate the feast together with the invited guests.

Everyone at Connor's castle enjoyed the feast. There was plenty of ale and wine. Pigs came off the spit. Lamb was in the stew. Songs were sung, and good times were had. Many commented that it was the best feast in the history of Ulster.

By now the king's anger at Bricrui's intrusion seemed to subside, so Bricrui thought the time was ripe for him to announce his own feast. Bricrui climbed onto the table, so that everyone could hear him.

Bricrui shouted: "*I propose a toast to King Connor for this wonderful feast*". Bricrui raised his glass and said, "*Sláinte*²!"

To which everyone raised a glass, and they too shouted "*Sláinte!*"

After everyone had a drink, and while he was still standing on the table, Bricrui continued: "*I too have prepared my castle for a great feast, and I came here to invite you all to the feast. It will be a brilliant feast. I too will have wine and ale, pigs off the spit, and lamb in the stew.*"

But Bricrui perhaps went a bit too far when he added: "*It will be at least as grand as this feast and perhaps it will be even better!*"

As you can see, tact was not Bricrui's strong point. He already angered King Connor once by showing up at the feast uninvited. Now he angered the king even more, by promising a feast even better than Connor's.

Of course no one there wanted to go to Bricrui's feast. No one liked Bricrui in the first place. And no one wanted to offend the king.

King Connor's inclination was to tell Bricrui to bugger off. But honor was too important to Connor, as I said, and the king did not know how to honorably refuse Bricrui's invitation.

² "SLAHN-sha"

So Connor agreed to attend, and to bring everyone with him - including the king's entourage, the Red Branch warriors, and wives and children, and attendants, etc., etc.

But the king had one condition, which he announced to all: *“I will attend your feast, Bricriu. And I will bring everyone with me. But if – and only if – you, Bricriu, do NOT attend.”*

All who heard this were in shock. The king would attend Bricriu’s Feast only if Bricriu himself did **not** attend. Everyone would go to Bricriu's feast - except Bricriu!

Bricriu was of course offended, but he had no choice but to comply. He was disgraced by this condition. But he would have been an even greater social outcast if he attended his own feast - or if he reneged or rescinded his invitation to the king. And so Bricriu accepted the condition.

A fortnight passed and the time came for Bricriu’s feast. A great procession left Connor's castle to that of Bricriu. The king, his wife the queen, the families of all who lived at his castle, the warriors of the Red Branch, the wives and families of the Red Branch warriors. Many others joined - those who yearned for the prestige of hanging out with the king and the Red Branch, and those delighted to witness the humiliation of Bricriu.

Many were in this latter category, since Bricriu had offended many an Ulsterman with his poisoned tongue over the years.

Bricriu accompanied the procession, not at all happy with the humiliation of his condition.

On the way, he spoke with Conall Cernach³ - Conall the Victorious. Conall was a great warrior in the Red Branch, but he was weird sort of man. For example, he always slept with the head of his latest foe at the foot of his bed.

Bricriu told Conall: *“The feast at my castle will include a special portion, which I have called the Champion’s Portion. The Champion's Portion will include a*

³ “CARE-na”

huge cauldron filled with undiluted wine. I have also prepared a pig, raised since a piglet eating nothing but fresh milk and finely ground meal. The best cut of this pig is saved for the Champion's Portion. And I have prepared wheat cakes baked in honey, served only in the Champion's Portion."

Conall asked "*Who will receive this Champion's Portion?*"

Bricriu responded: "*Only the bravest and strongest warrior of the Red Branch. Only the worthiest warrior – the champion of all Ulster. Which of course is you, Conall.*"

Conall agreed that if anyone deserved the Champion's Portion, it was he.

Later, Bricriu spoke with Conall's wife, Lendabair⁴.

He told her: "*I am indeed distressed that I cannot attend my own feast. I had reserved a seat for me next to that of the king. The queen of course will sit at the king's right, but I was to sit at his left.*"

Lendabair asked: "*Who will sit at the king's left, now that you cannot?*"

Bricriu replied: "*I will give that seat to the finest woman of all of Ulster.*"

Lendabair, with curiosity having the best of her, asked: "*And who is the finest woman of all Ulster?*"

And Bricriu said: "*Lendabair, your luster shines like the sun and you are the darling of Ulster. And your husband Conall is the bravest and strongest of all Ulster's warriors. So, it is you who shall sit on the king's left at the feast.*"

Lendabair was flattered by Bricriu's remarks, but also felt quite deserving. If anyone should be considered the finest woman of all Ulster, it should be she.

Later in the trip, Bricriu was riding next to Loegaire⁵ - known as the Triumphant. Loegaire was one of the greatest Red Branch warriors, older than most but still strong and vibrant.

⁴ "LEND-a-bear"

Bricriu told Loegaire all about the Champion's Portion - the bottomless pot of wine, the pig raised on fresh milk and finely ground meal, the honey baked wheat cakes. Loegaire's mouth was watering from the thought.

Loegaire was compelled to ask: "*Who shall receive this Champion's Portion?*"

Bricriu said: "*The Champion's Portion is reserved for the bravest and strongest warrior in the Red Branch -- the true Champion of Ulster. The one warrior, more than any other, who represents the best of the best in Ulster.*"

"*And who might that be*", asked Loegaire.

Bricriu replied: "*That of course, is you, brave Loegaire.*"

Loegaire nodded: "*Yes, if anyone deserves the Champion's Portion, it is me, and no other.*"

It was not long thereafter before Bricriu saw Fedelm⁶ - the wife of Loegaire.

After a fair amount of small talk, Bricriu said to her: "*I have reserved the seat on the left side of the king for the fairest woman in all of Ulster. And you, Fedelm, are as beautiful and exquisite as any woman on this island. Your wisdom and lineage are without parallel. And your husband, Loegaire, is the Champion of Ulster and deserving of the Champion's Portion at the Feast. Fedelm please, if you will do me this honor. Please sit on the left side of the king at the feast.*"

Fedelm blushed, slightly at the compliments, but she acknowledged to herself, that if any woman deserved this honor, it was she.

As the procession neared Bricriu's home, Bricriu found Cú Chulainn. Bricriu told Cú Chulainn all about the Champion's Portion - the wine, the pig, the wheat cakes.

And he said: "*You, Cú Chulainn, are truly the champion of Ulster. No one is as brave or strong, and no one has showed more honor, than you. You shall receive the Champion's Portion.*"

⁵ "LOY-gare-rah"

⁶ "FEE-ulm"

Cú Chulainn replied: *"I don't care about such things. As far as I am concerned, the Red Branch can share the Champion's Portion. But I am indeed the champion, and I will cut off the head of anyone who disagrees."*

When the procession had almost reached their destination, Bricrui found Emer⁷ - the wife of Cú Chulainn. Bricrui told her all about the seating arrangements.

And he said: *"Your hair seems as if it is spun of pure gold. Your beauty is the envy of all. And you are the wife of the best man in all the land. It is you who will sit on the left side of the king."*

Emer said: *"This is all nonsense"*.

But of course, she expected to sit in the place of honor next to the king.

The procession finally reached Bricrui's castle and everyone prepared for the feast.

The invited guests each entered large dining area in Bricrui's castle. Bricrui, as required, stayed outside.

The guests were in awe of the elaborate dining hall. There several rows of large, long tables. Each table, save two, had long benches on each side.

But one smaller table at the end of the hall had three ornate chairs. The center chair was far larger and ornate than the other two, and was most certainly the chair reserved for King Connor. The chair on its right was, with equal certainty, the chair reserved for the queen. The chair on its left had been reserved for Bricrui.

But now that Bricrui was banished from his own feast, who would sit there now?

There was another table, without a bench, at the other end of the dining hall. It had a single chair, quite large and ornate, but not quite as large or ornate as the chair reserved for the king.

⁷ "AY-mer"

A huge cauldron rested next to the table, filled with undiluted wine. On the end of the table was a large platter with a roasted pig. One suspected that it was a pig raised since a piglet on nothing but fresh milk and finely ground meal. Wheat cakes baked in honey sat on another platter on this table.

This clearly was the table with the Champion's Portion, reserved for the champion of Ulster.

But who was to receive the Champion's Portion?

As the procession entered the dining hall, the wives of the three Red Branch warriors each made their way to the main table, to sit on the left side of the king. The three Red Branch warriors in turn made their way to the table with the Champion's Portion. Each believed they were justified in so doing.

What do you think happened next?

All hell broke loose!

Emer, Fedelm and Lendabair fought over who should sit at the place of honor. They pulled each other's hair and ripped each other's bodices. They pushed and shoved until all three were on the ground in a full-scale free-for-all.

Cú Chulainn, Conall and Loegaire argued over who deserved the Champion's Portion. They too began to fight. They punched and kicked and pulled and shoved, and each drew blood from the other two.

Others at the feast joined in the brawl, with women joining in the fight between the three women and men joining in the fight between the three men. It wasn't very long before Bricriu's dining hall was in complete shambles.

Bricriu, meanwhile, was outside of the dining hall listening to the mayhem. Despite the destruction going on in his own castle, he was ecstatic. Everything had gone according to his plan. Revenge is, indeed, sweet.

It took a while before King Connor figured out what was going on and said: "*I smell the hand of Bricriu in this.*"

The king ordered everyone to stop fighting and, eventually, all complied. He ruled, quite wisely, that no one would sit in the chair on his left. And no one would sit in the table with the Champion's Portion. Both chairs would remain vacant during the feast.

The issue, though, was far from settled. Everyone feasted for two days and two nights. On the third day the quarrel resumed - over which warrior deserved the Champion's Portion and which woman deserved to sit at the king's table.

Connor realized that he had to devise a way to settle the matter. If he didn't, his three Red Branch warriors would surely draw swords and two of them would surely die. Connor did not wish to lose two of his best warriors to resolve the dispute.

Nor did he wish to see the three wives continue the quarrel, for he knew that no man could be happy while his wife was in such a vicious competition.

And so King Connor devised a challenge. This was a competition to determine which of the three Red Branch warriors was indeed the champion.

This challenge, as circumstances evolved, turned into many challenges. The Red Branch warriors faced the real and the supernatural. It's an epic tale which I am not going to tell you know.

But when you do hear the tale, as you no doubt will someday, you will know why the three warriors of the Red Branch were so determined to win.

They were tricked into the competition by the conniving of Bricriu for the honors at Bricriu's feast.