

Celtic Myth Month Six: The Curse of Macha

Fadó, fadó in Éirinn... long, long ago in Ireland, up in the north of the country in the place that today is known as Armagh, there lived a farmer called Cruinniuc. He was a widower with three children and he was having a hard time managing everything in the grief of losing his wife. The farm was falling down and the children were running wild and no matter how hard he worked, he seemed to be falling farther and farther behind.

One day though, Cruinniuc had a great surprise. Arriving home after a hard day out in the fields, he found his home sparkling and tidy, delicious smells wafting from the cookpot, the children clean and happy and there, in the middle of it all, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

'I've been watching you,' she said, 'and you need help. My name is Macha, I've come to be your wife and together we will build a home.' Well, Cruinniuc knew there was something about this that wasn't quite natural, but he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he welcomed her and indeed, together they did build a home that was happy, and well-run and prosperous, more than it had ever been before.

And if Cruinniuc noticed that his beautiful new wife was far stronger than he was himself, and far faster even than his best horse, and sometimes seemed away in another world altogether, he said little about it, for he had fallen deeply in love with her. When, after some time, she told him that she was pregnant with twins, he was delighted, and a prouder father-to-be had never been seen in the hills of Armagh.

One day, Cruinniuc received news that the king of Ulster had announced a big horse fair, and he determined to go there and join in the festivities. Macha didn't want him to go, for she was at the end of her pregnancy and knew her babies would be arriving soon. He wouldn't be dissuaded, though, and so eventually she let him go, but with a warning – 'don't tell anyone about me', she said. 'Don't be boasting or telling tales, or you'll bring disaster down on us.' Cruinniuc promised, and wished her well, and off he went.

The horse fair was big and noisy and sociable, and Cruinniuc met many old friends there. They talked and laughed and drank and boasted of their wealth and achievements, and Cruinniuc remembered his promise and stayed quiet. 'My wife is the most beautiful in Ulster', said one, and Cruinniuc remained silent. 'my cows give more milk than any others', said another, and Cruinniuc remained silent, although since Macha's arrival, his own cows were producing more than he had ever thought possible. The king joined in, boasting that his horses were the best at the fair, the fastest in the world. Eventually Cruinniuc got so annoyed that he could take it no more. 'My wife can run faster than those horses you're so proud of' he scoffed. The king was furious and ordered Cruinniuc brought before him. 'You may hope she can', he said, 'or I'll have your head for the way you've just spoken to me.' He ordered Macha brought before him. 'Let's have a race' he announced – 'my horse against your wife, and your life at stake'.

Well, Macha was at home waiting for the babies to arrive and when she saw a band of warriors thundering up to the door, she knew nothing good was coming. 'If you want to save your husband's life', they told her, 'you must come and race the king's finest horse.' 'Wait,' said Macha, 'until the babies are here – I can't run like this.' But they thought it was a fine joke to pitch a pregnant woman against a horse and they forced her to go with them.

When they reached the king's fortress, the crowd laughed and jeered at Macha but as she walked among them, they perceived the air of power that came from her and slowly they fell silent. 'Do not

do this' she said to the king. 'It is not worthy of you'. But the king was too proud to go back on his word and he told her that she must race if she wished to save her husband's life. As he looked her in the eye, he knew a moment of fear and when she asked him again to change his mind, he almost agreed, but his pride wouldn't let him. A third time she appealed to his better nature, and to the crowd 'Will no one come to my aid?' But they were all afraid of the king and he afraid to lose face, so no one spoke.

They lined up to begin the race, Macha and the king in his chariot with his fastest horse, and the horn blew, and they were off. And to the king's amazement first, and then fear, no matter how fast he drove his horse, Macha, supporting her great pregnant belly in her arms, was fleeter and faster than him. The birth pangs came on her as she ran, and she let out a great cry that froze the bones of all who heard it, but yet she ran, and she crossed the finish line before the king.

Then Macha fell to the ground in agony, and the women rushed to her aid but it was no good. Her babies, a boy and a girl, were born still and dead. And Macha rose, in rage and grief – and if it had not been clear to the crowd already that she was no human woman but a goddess of the Tuatha DeDanann, it was clear now. 'My curse on you, men of Ulster!' she cried. 'For not one of you would come to my aid in my hour of greatest need. I declare that from now, for nine generations, when the warriors of Ulster are in need, they will be struck down with the agony and weakness of a woman in childbirth and may no man come to their aid.' With a last look of contempt at the husband she had loved, Macha vanished and was never seen again. Cruinniuc's life was spared, but his heart was heavy for he had lost that which was most precious to him through his own folly. And as for the men of Ulster, Macha's curse came to pass, and they were struck down in their hour of greatest need – until a new hero emerged to help them... but that's another story.