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| **Cuchulain, Champion of Ireland** |
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| AMONG all the early literatures of Europe, there are two which, at exactly opposite corners of the continent, display most strikingly similar characteristics. These are the Greek and the Irish, and the legend of the Irish champion Cuchulain, which well illustrates the similarity of the literatures, bears so close a resemblance to the story of Achilles as to win for this hero the title of “the Irish Achilles.” Certainly in reckless courage, power of inspiring dread, sense of personal merit, and frankness of speech the Irish hero is fully equal to the mighty Greek. | *1* |
| Cuchulain was the nephew of King Conor of Ulster, son of his sister Dechtire, and it is said that his father was no mortal man, but the great god Lugh of the Long Hand. Cuchulain was brought up by King Conor himself, and even while he was still a boy his fame spread all over Ireland. His warlike deeds were those of a proved warrior, not of a child of nursery age; and by the time Cuchulain was seventeen he was without peer among the champions of Ulster. | *2* |
| Upon Cuchulain’s marriage to Emer, daughter of Forgall the Wily, a Druid of great power, the couple took up their residence at Armagh, the capital of Ulster, under the protection of King Conor. Here there was one chief, Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue, who, like Thersites among the Grecian leaders, delighted in making mischief. Soon he had on foot plans for stirring up strife among the heroes of Ulster, leaders among whom were the mighty Laegaire, Conall Cearnach, cousin of Cuchulain, and Cuchulain himself. Inviting the members of King Conor’s court to dinner, Bricriu arranged that a contest should arise over who should have the “champion’s portion,” and so successful was he that, to avoid a bloody fight, the three heroes mentioned decided to submit their claims to the championship of Ireland to King Ailill of Connaught. | *3* |
| Ailill put the heroes to an unexpected test. Their dinner was served them in a separate room, into which three magic beasts, in the shape of monstrous cats, were sent by the king. When they saw them Laegire and Conall rose from their meal, climbed among the rafters, and stayed there all night. Cuchulain waited until one cat attacked him, and then, drawing his sword, struck the monster. It showed no further sign of fight, and at daybreak the magic beasts disappeared. | *4* |
| As Laegire and Conall claimed that this test was an unfair one, Ailill sent the three rivals to Curoi of Kerry, a just and wise man, who set out to discover by wizardry and enchantments the best among the heroes. In turn they stood watch outside Curoi’s castle, where Laegire and Conall were overcome by a huge giant, who hurled spears of mighty oak trees, and ended by throwing them over the wall into the courtyard. Cuchulain alone withstood the giant, whereupon he was attacked by other magic foes. Among these was a dragon, which flew on horrible wings from a neighboring lake, and seemed ready to devour everything in its way. Cuchulain sprang up, giving his wonderful hero-leap, thrust his arm into the dragon’s mouth and down its throat, and tore out its heart. After the monster fell dead, he cut off its scaly head. | *5* |
| As even yet Cuchulain’s opponents would not admit his championship, they were all three directed to return to Armagh, to await Curoi’s judgment. Here it happened that all the Ulster heroes were in the great hall one night, except Cuchulain and his cousin Conall. As they sat in order of rank, a terrible stranger, gigantic in stature, hideous of aspect, with ravening yellow eyes, entered. In his hand he bore an enormous axe, with keen and shining edge. Upon King Conor’s inquiring his business there, the stranger replied: | *6* |
| “Behold my axe! The man who will grasp it to-day may cut my head off with it, provided that I may, in like manner, cut off his head to-morrow. If you have no champion who dare face me, I will say that Ulster has lost her courage and is dishonored.” | *7* |
| At once Laegire accepted the challenge. The giant laid his head on a block, and at a blow the hero severed it from the body. Thereupon the giant arose, took the head and the axe, and thus, headless, strode from the hall. But the following night, when he returned, sound as ever, to claim the fulfillment of Laegire’s promise, the latter’s heart failed him and he did not come forward. The stranger then jeered at the men of Ulster because their great champion durst not keep his agreement, nor face the blow he should receive in return for the one he gave. | *8* |
| The men of Ulster were utterly ashamed, but Conall Cearnach, who was present that night, made a new agreement with the stranger. He gave a blow which beheaded the giant, but again, when the latter returned whole and sound on the following evening, the champion was not to be found. | *9* |
| Now it was the turn of Cuchulain, who, as the others had done, cut off the giant’s head at one stroke. The next day the members of Conor’s court watched Cuchulain to see what he would do. They would not have been surprised if he had failed like the others, who now were present. The champion, however, showed no signs of failing or retreat. He sat sorrowfully in his place, and with a sigh said to King Conor as they waited: “Do not leave this place till all is over. Death is coming to me very surely, but I must fulfill my agreement, for I would rather die than break my word.” | *10* |
| Towards the close of day the stranger strode into the hall exultant. | *11* |
| “Where is Cuchulain?” he cried. | *12* |
| “Here I am,” was the reply. | *13* |
| “Ah, poor boy! Your speech is sad to-night, and the fear of death lies heavy on you; but at least you have redeemed your word and have not failed me.” | *14* |
| The youth rose from his seat and went towards him, as he stood with the great axe ready, and knelt to receive the blow. | *15* |
| The hero of Ulster laid his head on the block; but the giant was not satisfied. “Stretch out your neck better,” said he. | *16* |
| “You are playing with me, to torment me,” said Cuchulain. “Slay me now speedily, for I did not keep you waiting last night.” | *17* |
| However, he stretched out his neck as ordered, and the stranger raised his axe till it crashed upwards through the rafters of the hall, like the crash of trees falling in a storm. When the axe came down with a terrific sound all men looked fearfully at Cuchulain. The descending axe had not even touched him; it had come down with the blunt side on the ground, and the youth knelt there unharmed. Smiling at him, and leaning on his axe, stood no terrible and hideous stranger, but Curoi of Kerry, come to give his decision at last. | *18* |
| “Rise up, Cuchulain,” said Curoi. “There is none among all the heroes of Ulster to equal you in courage and loyalty and truth. The Championship of the Heroes of Ireland is yours from this day forth, and the Champion’s Portion at all feasts; and to your wife I adjudge the first place among all the women of Ulster. Woe to him who dares to dispute this decision!” Thereupon Curoi vanished, and the warriors gathered around Cuchulain, and all with one voice acclaimed him the Champion of the Heroes of all Ireland—a title which has clung to him until this day. | *19* |
| This is one of many stories told of the Irish champion, whose deeds of bravery would fill many pages. Cuchulain finally came to his end on the field of battle, after a fight in which he displayed all his usual gallantry but in which unfair means were used to overcome him. | *20* |
| For Wales and for England during centuries Arthur has been the representative “very gentle perfect knight.” In a similar way, in England’s sister isle, Cuchulain stands ever for the highest ideals of the Irish Gaels. | *21* |

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