

Cú Chulainn and Emer

Of all the great warriors of Ulster, Cú Chulainn was the favoured amongst the young women, who all did their best to attract his attention. He developed much faster than the other boys as his father was the god Lugh and he possessed a physical strength and pleasing manner that was not entirely of this world. He quickly grew into a handsome young warrior that was full of self-confidence. The other warriors saw this and began to worry that he would steal their own wives and girlfriends away from them. So, one evening after Cú Chulainn had gone to bed, the warriors gathered together to discuss the problem.

“There's no question about it”, said one man. “The only way to solve our little problem is to find Cú Chulainn a wife.”

There was a general murmur of agreement around the camp. The warriors swore they would search every town and village in Ireland to find a woman fit to be Cú Chulainn's bride.

So the men of Ulster searched the length and breadth of Ireland for a bride for Cú Chulainn, but he was not easy to please. In the meantime, Cú Chulainn himself had set his eyes on Emer, the beautiful daughter of Forgal, and had resolved that she and none other would be his bride. He cleaned himself up, with his weapons sharpened and muscles flexed, and went to woo Emer.

Emer greeted Cú Chulainn's efforts with gentle mockery.

“You are but a young warrior”, she said to him, “without a man's beard or any great deeds to your name.”

Cú Chulainn reddened, knowing that she was right.

“But,” she continued coyly, “I would consider marrying you if you achieve a great name in battle.”

Cú Chulainn had his work cut out for him, but he knew his skill and accepted the challenge without a moment's hesitation.

Now Emer's father Fergol had heard of this little encounter between his daughter and Cú Chulainn, and he was not pleased. To Fergol's mind, Cú Chulainn was an immature young man, with a swollen sense of his own abilities as a warrior. In short, he was not good enough for his beloved daughter Emer.

A scheming plan began to unfold in Fergol's head. The next evening, he made his way to the Conchobar's court in Eamain Macha, posing as a Gaulish warrior that wished to pay tribute to the great Conchobar of Ulster. Flattered by the smooth-talking Fergol, Conchobar threw a feast in his honour and ordered his warriors to display their famed skills of battle. Cú Chulainn appeared and there were great cheers as he showed off his nimbleness and deft battle movements. Fergol grasped the opportunity.

“Young Cú Chulainn truly possesses unique skill”, he remarked. “You are lucky to have him as one of your warriors, but imagine if he was sent to Scotland to train with Domnall Mildemail and then to study the arts of the woman warrior Scathach! What a man he would be, for he would surpass every warrior in all of Europe.”

Just as Fergol had planned, Cú Chulainn overheard the remark. His pride swelled within him and he passionately vowed to take on this training so there would be no question of his status as the greatest warrior in Europe. Fergol smiled to himself: it seemed that he had snared the young Cú Chulainn. Soon he would be far away from Emer and Fergol would arrange her marriage to another.

Cú Chulainn Gets his Training

So Cú Chulainn travelled to Scotland on foot of Fergol's remark, eagerly seeking to train with Domnall Mildemail. His warrior skills were put to the ultimate test, as he endured his training within an inch of his life. He danced and practiced the warrior arts until his feet were hard as granite. Then he performed the 'Hero's Coil on the Spikes of Spears' where he climbed up a spear and performed his warrior dance on its point without making his soles bleed. The rigorous methods of

Domnall Mildemail paid off, and soon Cú Chulainn's skills were perfectly fine-tuned.

“I can teach you no more”, Domnall said to him. “You must go to Scáthach, the great woman warrior that lives on the Isle of Skye, to complete your training.”

With that, Cú Chulainn turned on his heel and followed the road east towards the Isle of Skye.

Cú Chulainn's skill was challenged long before he reached Scáthach. The bridge that connected the main land to the Isle of Skye was crawling with her pupils, unwilling to let anyone but the most highly trained warrior across as anyone else would be unworthy of their teacher. Three times he tried to cross, and three times he failed. The increasing jeers from Scáthach's pupils only fuelled his determination, and his quick thinking and speed of movement ensured his safe crossing on the fourth attempt.

Scáthach had been watching his progress and thought to herself, “now this is a young man that is worth training for he will make the finest warrior in all of Europe.” And she was right for Cú Chulainn learned many new skills from Scáthach, including using the barbed spear that is thrown with the foot and lodges itself so deeply in the victim that it can only be removed by cutting it out. He became battle-hardy through all his experience, killing Scáthach's famed champion Cochar in a challenge. He even conquered the Queen Aoife and her army for Scáthach. As his prize, he chose to feast with Aoife at her palace and she bore him a son, who would be called Connla.

Cú Chulainn returns to Emer

Finally, just as Cú Chulainn had learned all of Scáthach's warrior arts, he received a message urging his return to Ulster. He bid farewell to Scáthach and started on the long journey home to his native Ulster.

A great banquet was held in his honour when he returned home, and he indulged his captive audience with tales of perilous adventures in Scotland. After all the celebrations were over, he set out for Fergol's stronghold to claim Emer. Now since Cú Chulainn had been away in Scotland, Fergol had endeavoured to marry Emer to Lugaid Mac Nois, a new champion of Munster. Unfortunately for Fergol, his great plan began to fall apart when Lugaid refused to marry Emer because she was in love with Cú Chulainn. Fergol's only option was to garrison his castle with every warrior he could muster and hope to take Cú Chulainn down by force.

A ferocious battle between Cú Chulainn and Fergol's warriors ensued. He killed scores of men that day using his newly acquired tricks of battle, proving his worth to Emer just as he had promised. Fergol himself died trying to escape the battle-frenzy of Cú Chulainn, and when there was no one left to challenge him, Cú Chulainn went to Emer. She had waited for him since the day he left for Scotland and now the couple went to Eamain Macha to stand before Conchobar.

“Welcome!”, boomed Conchobar on their arrival. “I have heard of your great feat today Cú Chulainn. Indeed, I believe that there isn't a warrior in all of Europe that could better you now. And I see you won a great bride in Emer.”

The atmosphere within Conchobar's palace was uneasy, as all who were present knew that it was the privilege of Conchobar to spend the first night of a marriage with every woman in Ulster. Conchobar himself did not want to unleash the wrath of Cú Chulainn by reminding him of the custom, yet neither did he wish to show any weakness of authority. However, on the advice of the druid Cathbad, Conchobar slept with Emer on that first night with Cathbad sleeping between them.

This arrangement was sufficient to check Cú Chulainn's brewing anger at such a custom, and the following morning Emer returned to him. Their love remained as strong as the first day they met.