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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Culhwch and Olwen

There was once a king and queen who had a little boy, and they called his name Culhwch. The queen, his mother, fell ill soon after his birth, and as she could not take care of him herself she sent him to a woman she knew up in the mountains, so that he might learn to go out in all weathers, and bear heat and cold, and grow tall and strong.

Soon after she had sent her baby away the queen became much worse, and at length, seeing that she was going to die, she called her husband to her and said: 'Never again shall I rise from this bed, and you must take another wife.'

One day when the king was out hunting he rode past the place where the queen lay buried, and there he saw a briar growing with two blossoms on it.

'It is time that I took a wife,' said he, and after long looking he found one. But he did not tell her about his son; indeed he hardly remembered that he had one till she heard it at last from an old woman whom she had gone to visit. And the new queen was very pleased, and sent messengers to fetch the boy, and in his father's court he stayed, while the years went by till one day the queen told him that a prophecy had foretold that he was to win for his wife Olwen the daughter of the giant Yspaddaden Penkawr.

When he heard this Culhwch felt proud and happy. Surely he must be a man now, he thought, or there would be no talk of a wife for him, and his mind dwelt all day upon his promised bride, and what she would be like when he beheld her.

'What ails you, my son?' asked his father at last, when Culhwch had forgotten something he had been bidden to do, and Culhwch blushed red as he answered: 'My stepmother says that none but Olwen, the daughter of Yspaddaden Penkawr, shall be my wife.'

'That will be easily fulfilled,' replied his father. 'Arthur the king is your cousin. Go to him and ask him for help.'

The boy journeyed towards Arthur's palace.

'Greetings,' said Arthur. 'Sit between two of my warriors, and you will have minstrels before you and all that belongs to one born to be a king, while you remain in my palace. Who are you?'

'I am Culhwch, son of Cilydd,' replied the youth. 'I didn't come,' replied Culhwch, 'for meat and drink, but to obtain a favour, and if you grant it me I will pay it back, and will carry your praise to the four winds of heaven. But if you will not grant it to me, then I will



Culhwch arrives at the Gate of Arthur's Palace

proclaim your discourtesy wherever your name is known.'

'So you are my cousin. What you ask for, you will receive,' said Arthur, 'as far as the wind dries and the rain moistens, and the sun revolves and the sea encircles and the earth extends. Save only my ship and my mantle, my sword and my lance, my shield and my dagger, and Guinevere my wife.'

'The request I crave is that you may win for me Olwen, the daughter of Yspaddaden Penkawr, and this request I seek likewise at the hands of your warriors. From Sol, who can stand all day upon one foot; from Ossol, who, if he were to find himself on the top of the highest mountain in the world, could make it into a level plain in the beat of a bird's wing; from Clust, who, though he were buried under the earth, could yet hear the ant leave her nest fifty miles away: from these and from Kai and from Bedwyr and from all thy mighty men I crave this request.'

Then Arthur summoned his five best men and bade them go with Culhwch. There was Bedwyr the one-handed, Kai's comrade and brother in arms, the swiftest man in Britain save Arthur; there was Kynddelig, who knew the paths in a land where he had never been as surely as he did those of his own country; there was Gwrhyr, that could speak all tongues; and Gwalchmai the son of Gwyar, who never returned till he had gained what he sought; and last of all there was Menw, who could weave a spell over them so that none might see them, while they could see every one.

So these seven journeyed together till they reached a vast open plain in which was a fair castle. But though it seemed so close it was not until the evening of the third day that they really drew near to it, and in front of it a flock of sheep was spread, so many in number that there seemed no end to them. A shepherd stood on a mound watching over them, and by his side was a dog, as large as a horse nine winters old.

'Whose is this castle, O herdsman?' asked the knights.

'Stupid are you truly,' answered the herdsman. 'All the world knows that this is the castle of Yspaddaden Penkawr.'

'And who are you?'

'I am called Custennin, brother of Yspaddaden, and ill has he treated me. And who are you, and what do you here?'



'We come from Arthur the king, to seek Olwen the daughter of Yspaddaden,' but at this news the shepherd gave a cry: 'O men, be warned and turn back while there is yet time. Others have gone on that quest, but none have escaped to tell the tale,' and he rose to his feet as if to leave them. But he invited them to come to his house and meet his wife.

'What is your errand here?' asked the woman.

'We seek Olwen the maiden for this youth,' answered Kai; 'does she ever come here so that she may be seen?' 'She comes every Saturday to wash her hair, and in the vessel where she washes she leaves all her rings, and never does she so much as send a messenger to fetch them.'

'Will she come if she is bidden?' asked Kai, pondering. 'She will come; but unless you pledge me your faith that you will not harm her I will not fetch her.'

'We pledge it,' said they, and the maiden came.

A fair sight was she in a robe of flame-coloured silk, with a collar of ruddy gold about her neck, bright with emeralds and rubies. More yellow was her head than the flower of the broom, and her skin was whiter than the foam of the wave, and fairer were her hands than the blossom of the wood anemone. Four white trefoils sprang up where she trod, and therefore was she called Olwen.

She entered, and sat down on a bench beside Culhwch, and he spake to her: 'Ah, maiden, since first I heard your name I have loved you—will you not come away with me from this evil place?'

'That I cannot do,' answered she, 'for I have given my word to my father not to go without his knowledge, for his life will only last till I am betrothed. Whatever is, must be, but this counsel I will give you. Go, and ask me of my father, and whatsoever he shall require of you grant it, and you will win me; but if you deny him anything you will not obtain me, and it will be well for you if you escape with your life.'

'All this I promise,' said he.

So she returned to the castle, and all Arthur's men went after her, and entered the hall.

'Greetings, Yspaddaden Penkawr,' said they. 'We come to ask your daughter Olwen for Culhwch.'

'Come here tomorrow and I will answer you,' replied Yspaddaden Penkawr, and as they rose to leave the hall he caught up one of the three poisoned darts that lay beside him and flung it in their midst. But Bedwyr saw and caught it, and flung it back so hard that it pierced the knee of Yspaddaden.

'A gentle son-in-law, truly!' he cried, writhing with pain. 'I shall ever walk the worse for this rudeness. Cursed be the smith who forged it, and the anvil on which it was wrought!'

That night the men slept in the house of Custennin the herdsman, and the next day they proceeded to the castle, and entered the hall, and said: 'Yspaddaden Penkawr, give us your daughter and you will keep her dower. And unless you will do this we will slay you.'

'Her four great grandmothers and her four great grandfathers yet live,' answered Yspaddaden Penkawr; 'it is needful that I take counsel with them.'

'Be it so; we will go to meat,' but as they turned he took up the second dart that lay by his side and cast it after them. And Menw caught it, and flung it at him, and wounded him in the chest, so that it came out at his back.

'A gentle son-in-law, truly!' cried Yspaddaden; 'the iron pains me like the bite of a horse-leech. Cursed be the

hearth whereon it was heated, and the smith who formed it!

The third day Arthur's men returned to the palace into the presence of Yspaddaden.

'Shoot not at me again,' said he, 'unless you desire death. But lift up my eyebrows, which have fallen over my eyes, that I may see my son-in-law.' Then they arose, and as they did so Yspaddaden Penkawr took the third poisoned dart and cast it at them. And Culhwch caught it, and flung it back, and it passed through his eyeball, and came out on the other side of his head.

'A gentle son-in-law, truly! Cursed be the fire in which it was forged and the man who fashioned it!'

The next day Arthur's men came again to the palace and said: 'Shoot not at us any more unless you desire more pain than ever, give us your daughter without more words.'

'Where is he that seeks my daughter? Let him come here so that I may see him.' And Culhwch sat himself in a chair and spoke face to face with him.

'Is it you that seeks my daughter?'

'It is I,' answered Culhwch.

'First give me your word that you will do nothing towards me that is not just, and when you have won for me that which I shall ask, then you shall wed my daughter.'

'I promise right willingly,' said Culhwch. 'Name what you want.'

'Do you see that hill? Well, in one day it shall be rooted up and ploughed and sown, and the grain shall ripen,

and of that wheat I will bake the cakes for my daughter's wedding.'

'It will be easy for me to compass this, although you make it seem it will not be easy,' answered Culhwch, thinking of Ossol, under whose feet the highest mountain became straightway a plain, but Yspaddaden paid no heed, and continued: 'Do you see that other field over there? When my daughter was born nine bushels of flax were sown therein, and not one blade has sprung up. I require you to sow fresh flax in the ground that my daughter may wear a veil spun from it on the day of her wedding.'

'It will be easy for me to compass this.'

'You must bring me the basket of Gwyddneu Garanhir which will give meat to the whole world. It is for your wedding feast. You must also fetch me the drinking-horn that is never empty, and the harp that never ceases to play until it is bidden. Also the comb and scissors and razor that lie between the two ears of Trwyth the boar, so that I may arrange my hair for the wedding. But I don't think you will, for Trwyth the boar will not let any man take from him the comb and the scissors, unless Drudwyn the whelp hunt him. But no leash in the world can hold Drudwyn save the leash of Cant Ewin, and no collar will hold the leash except the collar of Canhastyr.'

'It will be easy for me to compass this, though you think it will not be easy,' Culhwch answered him.

'Throughout the world there is none that can hunt with this dog save Mabon the son of Modron. He was taken

from his mother when three nights old, and it is not known where he now is, nor whether he is living or dead, and though you find him yet the boar will never be slain save only with the sword of Gwrnach the giant, and only then will you obtain my daughter.'

'Horses shall I have, and knights from my lord Arthur. And I shall gain your daughter, and you will lose your life.'

The speech of Culhwch with Yspaddaden Penkawr was ended.

Then Arthur's men set forth, and Culhwch with them, and journeyed till they reached the largest castle in the world, and a man came out to meet them.

'Where did you come from?' asked they, 'and whose is that castle?'

'That is the castle of Gwrnach the giant, as all the world knows,' answered the man, 'but no guest ever returned thence alive, and none may enter the gate except a craftsman, who brings his trade.' But little did Arthur's men heed his warning, and they went straight to the gate.

'Open!' cried Gwrhynr.

'I will not open,' replied the porter.

'And wherefore?' asked Kai.

'The knife is in the meat, and the drink is in the horn, and there is revelry in the hall of Gwrnach the giant, and save for a craftsman who brings his trade the gate will not be opened to-night.'

'Verily, then, I may enter,' said Kai, 'for there is no better burnisher of swords than I.'

'This will I tell Gwrnach the giant, and I will bring you his answer.'

'Bid the man come before me,' cried Gwrnach, when the porter had told his tale, 'for my sword stands much in need of polishing,' so Kai passed in and saluted Gwrnach the giant.

'Is it true what I hear of you, that you can burnish swords?'

'It is true,' answered Kai. Then was the sword of Gwrnach brought to him.

'Shall it be burnished white or blue?' said Kai, taking a whetstone from under his arm.

'As you want,' answered the giant, and speedily did Kai polish half the sword. The giant marvelled at his skill, and said: 'It is a wonder that such a man as you should be without a companion.'

'I have a companion, noble sir, but he has no skill in this art.'

'What is his name?' asked the giant.

'Let the porter go forth, and I will tell him how he may know him. The head of his lance will leave its shaft, and draw blood from the wind, and descend upon its shaft again.' So the porter opened the gate and Bedwyr entered.

Now there was much talk amongst those who remained without when the gate closed upon Bedwyr, and Goreu, son of Custennin, prevailed with the porter, and he and his companions got in also and hid themselves.

By this time the whole of the sword was polished, and Kai gave it into the hand of Gwrnach the giant, who felt it and said: 'Your work is good; I am content.'

Then said Kai: 'It is your scabbard that has rusted your sword; give it to me that I may take out the wooden sides of it and put in new ones.' And he took the scabbard in one hand and the sword in the other, and came and stood behind the giant, as if he would have sheathed the sword in the scabbard. But with it he struck a blow at the head of the giant, and it rolled from his body. After that they despoiled the castle of its gold and jewels, and returned, bearing the sword of the giant, to Arthur's court.

They told Arthur how they had sped, and they all took counsel together, and agreed that they must set out on the quest for Mabon the son of Modron, and Gwrhyr, who knew the languages of beasts and of birds, went with them. So they journeyed until they came to the nest of an ousel, and Gwrhyr spoke to her.

'Tell me if you know anything of Mabon the son of Modron, who was taken when three nights old from between his mother and the wall.'

And the ousel answered: 'When I first came here I was a young bird, and there was a smith's anvil in this place. But from that time no work has been done upon it, save that every evening I have pecked at it, till now there is not so much as the size of a nut remaining thereof. Yet all that time I have never once heard of the man you name. Still, there is a race of beasts older than I, and I will guide you to them.'

So the ousel flew before them, till she reached the stag of Redynvre; but when they inquired of the stag whether he knew aught of Mabon he shook his head. 'When first I came hither,' said he, 'the plain was bare save for one oak sapling, which grew up to be an oak with a hundred branches. All that is left of that oak is a withered stump, but never once have I heard of the man you name. Nevertheless, as you are Arthur's men, I will guide you to the place where there is an animal older than I;' and the stag ran before them till he reached the owl of Cwm Cawlwyd. But when they inquired of the owl if he knew aught of Mabon he shook his head.

'When first I came hither,' said he, 'the valley was a wooded glen; then a race of men came and rooted it up. After that there grew a second wood, and then a third, which you see. Look at my wings also—are they not withered stumps? Yet until today I have never heard of the man you name. Still, I will guide you to the oldest animal in the world, and the one that has travelled most, the eagle of Gwern Abbey.'

And he flew before them, as fast as his old wings would carry him, till he reached the eagle of Gwern Abbey, but when they



inquired of the eagle whether he knew aught of Mabon he shook his head.

'When I first came hither,' said the eagle, 'there was a rock here, and every evening I pecked at the stars from the top of it. Now, behold, it is not even a span high! But only once have I heard of the man you name, and that was when I went in search of food as far as Llyn Llyw. I swooped down upon a salmon, and struck my claws into him, but he drew me down under water till scarcely could I escape from him. Then I summoned all my kindred to destroy him, but he made peace with me, and I took fifty fish spears from his back. Unless he may know something of the man whom you seek I cannot tell who may. But I will guide you to the place where he is.'

So they followed the eagle, who flew before them, though so high was he in the sky, it was often hard to mark his flight. At length he stopped above a deep pool in a river.

'Salmon of Llyn Llyw,' he called, 'I have come to thee with an embassy from Arthur to inquire if thou knowest aught concerning Mabon the son of Modron?' And the Salmon answered:

'As much as I know I will tell you. With every tide I go up the river, till I reach the walls of Gloucester, and there have I found such wrong as I never found elsewhere. And that you may see that what I say is true let two of you go thither on my shoulders.' So Kai and Gwrhyr went upon the shoulders of the salmon,

and were carried under the walls of the prison, from which proceeded the sound of great weeping.

'Who is it that thus laments in this house of stone?'

'It is I, Mabon the son of Modron.'

'Will silver or gold bring thy freedom, or only battle and fighting?' asked Gwrhyr again.

'By fighting alone shall I be set free,' said Mabon.

Then they sent a messenger to Arthur to tell him that Mabon was found, and he brought all his warriors to the castle of Gloucester and fell fiercely upon it; while Kai and Bedwyr went on the shoulders of the salmon to the gate of the dungeon, and broke it down and carried away Mabon. And he now being free returned home with Arthur.

After this, on a certain day, as Gwrhyr was walking across a mountain he heard a grievous cry, and he hastened towards it. In a little valley he saw the heather burning and the fire spreading fast towards an anthill, and all the ants were hurrying to and fro, not knowing whither to go. Gwrhyr had pity on them, and put out the fire, and in gratitude the ants brought him the nine bushels of flax seed which Yspaddaden Penkawr required of Culhwch. And many of the other marvels were done likewise by Arthur and his knights, and at last it came to the fight with Trwyth the boar, to obtain the comb and the scissors and the razor that lay between his ears. But hard was the boar to catch, and fiercely did he fight when Arthur's men gave him battle, so that many of them were slain.

Up and down the country went Trwyth the boar, and Arthur followed after him, till they came to the Severn sea. There three knights caught his feet unawares and plunged him into the water, while one snatched the razor from him, and another seized the scissors. But before they laid hold of the comb he had shaken them all off, and neither man nor horse nor dog could reach him till he came to Cornwall, whither Arthur had sworn he should not go. Thither Arthur followed after him with his knights, and if it had been hard to win the razor and the scissors, the struggle for the comb was fiercer still. Often it seemed as if the boar would be the victor, but at length Arthur prevailed, and the boar was driven into the sea. And whether he was drowned or where he went no man knows to this day.

In the end all the marvels were done, and Culhwch set forward, and with him Goreu, the son of Custennin, to Yspaddaden Penkawr, bearing in their hands the razor, the scissors and the comb, and Yspaddaden Penkawr was shaved by Kaw.

'Is your daughter mine now?' asked Culhwch.

'She is yours,' answered Yspaddaden, 'but it is Arthur and none other who has won her for you. Of my own free will you would have never have had her, for now I must lose my life.' And as he spake Goreu the son of Custennin cut off his head, as it had been ordained, and Arthur's hosts returned each man to his own country.