

Conal Yellowclaw

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Celtic

Intermediate

24 min read

Conall Yellowclaw was a sturdy tenant in Erin: he had three sons. There was at that time a king over every fifth of Erin. It fell out for the children of the king that was near Conall, that they themselves and the children of Conall came to blows. The children of Conall got the upper hand, and they killed the king's big son. The king sent a message for Conall, and he said to him—"Oh, Conall! what made your sons go to spring on my sons till my big son was killed by your children? but I see that though I follow you revengefully, I shall not be much better for it, and I will now set a thing before you, and if you will do it, I will not follow you with revenge. If you and your sons will get me the brown horse of the king of Lochlann, you shall get the souls of your sons."

"Why," said Conall, "should not I do the pleasure of the king, though there should be no souls of my sons in dread at all. Hard is the matter you require of me, but I will lose my own life, and the life of my sons, or else I will do the pleasure of the king."

After these words Conall left the king, and he went home: when he got home he was under much trouble and perplexity. When he went to lie down he told his wife the thing the king had set before him. His wife took much sorrow that he was obliged to part from herself, while she knew not if she should see him more.

“Oh, Conall,” said she, “why didst not thou let the king do his own pleasure to thy sons, rather than be going now, while I know not if ever I shall see thee more?”

When he rose on the morrow, he set himself and his three sons in order, and they took their journey towards Lochlann, and they made no stop but tore through ocean till they reached it. When they reached Lochlann they did not know what they should do. Said the old man to his sons, “Stop ye, and we will seek out the house of the king’s miller.”

When they went into the house of the king’s miller, the man asked them to stop there for the night. Conall told the miller that his own children and the children of his king had fallen out, and that his children had killed the king’s son, and there was nothing that would please the king but that he should get the brown horse of the king of Lochlann.

“If you will do me a kindness, and will put me in a way to get him, for certain I will pay ye for it.”

“The thing is silly that you are come to seek,” said the miller; “for the king has laid his mind on him so greatly that you will not get him in any way unless you steal him; but if you can make out a way, I will keep it secret.”

“This is what I am thinking,” said Conall, “since you are working every day for the king, you and your gillies could put myself and my sons into five sacks of bran.”

“The plan that has come into your head is not bad,” said the miller.

The miller spoke to his gillies, and he said to them to do this, and they put them in five sacks. The king’s gillies came to seek the bran, and they took the five sacks with them, and they emptied them before the horses. The servants locked the door, and they went away.

When they rose to lay hand on the brown horse, said Conall, “You shall not do that. It is hard to get out of this; let us make for ourselves five hiding holes, so that if they hear us we may go and hide.” They made the holes, then they laid hands on the horse. The horse was pretty well unbroken, and he set to making a terrible noise through the stable. The king heard the noise. “It must be my brown horse,” said he to his gillies; “find out what is wrong with him.”

The servants went out, and when Conall and his sons saw them coming they went into the hiding holes. The servants looked amongst the horses, and they did not find anything wrong; and they returned and they told this to the king, and the king said to them that if nothing was wrong they should go to their places of rest. When the gillies had time to be gone, Conall and his sons laid their hands again on the horse. If the noise was great that he made before, the noise he made now was seven times greater. The king sent a message for his gillies again, and said for certain there was something troubling the brown horse. "Go and look well about him." The servants went out, and they went to their hiding holes. The servants rummaged well, and did not find a thing. They returned and they told this.

"That is marvellous for me," said the king: "go you to lie down again, and if I notice it again I will go out myself."

When Conall and his sons perceived that the gillies were gone, they laid hands again on the horse, and one of them caught him, and if the noise that the horse made on the two former times was great, he made more this time.

"Be this from me," said the king; "it must be that some one is troubling my brown horse." He sounded the bell hastily, and when his waiting-man came to him, he said to him to let the stable gillies know that something was wrong with the horse. The gillies came, and the king went with them. When Conall and his sons perceived the company coming they went to the hiding holes.

The king was a wary man, and he saw where the horses were making a noise.

"Be wary," said the king, "there are men within the stable, let us get at them somehow."

The king followed the tracks of the men, and he found them. Every one knew Conall, for he was a valued tenant of the king of Erin, and when the king brought them up out of the holes he said, "Oh, Conall, is it you that are here?"

“I am, O king, without question, and necessity made me come. I am under thy pardon, and under thine honour, and under thy grace.” He told how it happened to him, and that he had to get the brown horse for the king of Erin, or that his sons were to be put to death. “I knew that I should not get him by asking, and I was going to steal him.”

“Yes, Conall, it is well enough, but come in,” said the king. He desired his look-out men to set a watch on the sons of Conall, and to give them meat. And a double watch was set that night on the sons of Conall.

“Now, O Conall,” said the king, “were you ever in a harder place than to be seeing your lot of sons hanged tomorrow? But you set it to my goodness and to my grace, and say that it was necessity brought it on you, so I must not hang you. Tell me any case in which you were as hard as this, and if you tell that, you shall get the soul of your youngest son.”

“I will tell a case as hard in which I was,” said Conall. “I was once a young lad, and my father had much land, and he had parks of year-old cows, and one of them had just calved, and my father told me to bring her home. I found the cow, and took her with us. There fell a shower of snow. We went into the herd’s bothy, and we took the cow and the calf in with us, and we were letting the shower pass from us. Who should come in but one cat and ten, and one great one-eyed fox-coloured cat as head bard over them. When they came in, in very deed I myself had no liking for their company. ‘Strike up with you,’ said the head bard, ‘why should we be still? and sing a cronan to Conall Yellowclaw.’ I was amazed that my name was known to the cats themselves. When they had sung the cronan, said the head bard, ‘Now, O Conall, pay the reward of the cronan that the cats have sung to thee.’ ‘Well then,’ said I myself, ‘I have no reward whatsoever for you, unless you should go down and take that calf.’

No sooner said I the word than the two cats and ten went down to attack the calf, and in very deed, he did not last them long. ‘Play up with you, why should you be silent? Make a cronan to Conall Yellowclaw,’ said the head bard. Certainly I had no liking at all for the cronan, but up came the one cat and ten, and if they did not sing me a cronan then and there! ‘Pay them now their reward,’ said the great fox-coloured cat. ‘I am tired myself of yourselves and your rewards,’ said I. ‘I have no reward for you unless you take that cow down there.’ They betook themselves to the cow, and indeed she did not last them long.

“Why will you be silent? Go up and sing a cronan to Conall Yellowclaw,” said the head bard. And surely, oh king, I had no care for them or for their cronan, for I began to see that they were not good comrades. When they had sung me the cronan they betook themselves down where the head bard was. ‘Pay now their reward,’ said the head bard; and for sure, oh king, I had no reward for them; and I said to them, ‘I have no reward for you.’ And surely, oh king, there was catterwauling between them.

So I leapt out at a turf window that was at the back of the house. I took myself off as hard as I might into the wood. I was swift enough and strong at that time; and when I felt the rustling toirm of the cats after me I climbed into as high a tree as I saw in the place, and one that was close in the top; and I hid myself as well as I might. The cats began to search for me through the wood, and they could not find me; and when they were tired, each one said to the other that they would turn back.

‘But,’ said the one-eyed fox-coloured cat that was commander-in-chief over them, ‘you saw him not with your two eyes, and though I have but one eye, there’s the rascal up in the tree.’ When he had said that, one of them went up in the tree, and as he was coming where I was, I drew a weapon that I had and I killed him. ‘Be this from me!’ said the one-eyed one—‘I must not be losing my company thus; gather round the root of the tree and dig about it, and let down that villain to earth.’ On this they gathered about the tree, and they dug about the root, and the first branching root that they cut, she gave a shiver to fall, and I myself gave a shout, and it was not to be wondered at.

“There was in the neighbourhood of the wood a priest, and he had ten men with him delving, and he said, ‘There is a shout of a man in extremity and I must not be without replying to it.’ And the wisest of the men said, ‘Let it alone till we hear it again.’ The cats began again digging wildly, and they broke the next root; and I myself gave the next shout, and in very deed it was not a weak one.

‘Certainly,’ said the priest, ‘it is a man in extremity—let us move.’ They set themselves in order for moving. And the cats arose on the tree, and they broke the third root, and the tree fell on her elbow. Then I gave the third shout. The stalwart men hastened, and when they saw how the cats served the tree, they began at them with the spades; and they themselves and the cats began at each other, till the cats ran away. And surely, oh king, I did not move till I saw the last one of them off. And then I came home. And there’s the hardest case in which I ever was; and it seems to me that tearing by the cats were harder than hanging to-morrow by the king of

Lochlann.”

“Och! Conall,” said the king, “you are full of words. You have freed the soul of your son with your tale; and if you tell me a harder case than that you will get your second youngest son, and then you will have two sons.”

“Well then,” said Conall, “on condition that thou dost that, I will tell thee how I was once in a harder case than to be in thy power in prison to-night.”

“Let’s hear,” said the king.

“I was then,” said Conall, “quite a young lad, and I went out hunting, and my father’s land was beside the sea, and it was rough with rocks, caves, and rifts. When I was going on the top of the shore, I saw as if there were a smoke coming up between two rocks, and I began to look what might be the meaning of the smoke coming up there. When I was looking, what should I do but fall; and the place was so full of heather, that neither bone nor skin was broken. I knew not how I should get out of this. I was not looking before me, but I kept looking overhead the way I came—and thinking that the day would never come that I could get up there.

It was terrible for me to be there till I should die. I heard a great clattering coming, and what was there but a great giant and two dozen of goats with him, and a buck at their head. And when the giant had tied the goats, he came up and he said to me, ‘Hao O! Conall, it’s long since my knife has been rusting in my pouch waiting for thy tender flesh.’ ‘Och!’ said I, ‘it’s not much you will be bettered by me, though you should tear me asunder; I will make but one meal for you. But I see that you are one-eyed. I am a good leech, and I will give you the sight of the other eye.’

The giant went and he drew the great caldron on the site of the fire. I myself was telling him how he should heat the water, so that I should give its sight to the other eye. I got heather and I made a rubber of it, and I set him upright in the caldron. I began at the eye that was well, pretending to him that I would give its sight to the other one, till I left them as bad as each other; and surely it was easier to spoil the one that was well than to give sight to the other.

“When he saw that he could not see a glimpse, and when I myself said to him that I would get out in spite of him, he gave a spring out of the water, and he stood in the mouth of the cave, and he said that he would have revenge for the sight of his eye. I had but to stay there crouched the length of the night, holding in my breath in

such a way that he might not find out where I was.

“When he felt the birds calling in the morning, and knew that the day was, he said—’Art thou sleeping? Awake and let out my lot of goats.’ I killed the buck. He cried, ‘I do believe that thou art killing my buck.’

“I am not,’ said I, ‘but the ropes are so tight that I take long to loose them.’ I let out one of the goats, and there he was caressing her, and he said to her, ‘There thou art thou shaggy, hairy white goat; and thou seest me, but I see thee not.’ I kept letting them out by the way of one and one, as I flayed the buck, and before the last one was out I had him flayed bag-wise. Then I went and I put my legs in place of his legs, and my hands in place of his forelegs, and my head in place of his head, and the horns on top of my head, so that the brute might think that it was the buck. I went out. When I was going out the giant laid his hand on me, and he said, ‘There thou art, thou pretty buck; thou seest me, but I see thee not.’ When I myself got out, and I saw the world about me, surely, oh, king! joy was on me. When I was out and had shaken the skin off me, I said to the brute, ‘I am out now in spite of you.’

“Aha!’ said he, ‘hast thou done this to me. Since thou wert so stalwart that thou hast got out, I will give thee a ring that I have here; keep the ring, and it will do thee good.’

“I will not take the ring from you,’ said I, ‘but throw it, and I will take it with me.’ He threw the ring on the flat ground, I went myself and I lifted the ring, and I put it on my finger. When he said me then, ‘Is the ring fitting thee?’ I said to him, ‘It is.’ Then he said, ‘Where art thou, ring?’ And the ring said, ‘I am here.’ The brute went and went towards where the ring was speaking, and now I saw that I was in a harder case than ever I was. I drew a dirk. I cut the finger from off me, and I threw it from me as far as I could out on the loch, and there was a great depth in the place. He shouted, ‘Where art thou, ring?’ And the ring said, ‘I am here,’ though it was on the bed of ocean. He gave a spring after the ring, and out he went in the sea. And I was as pleased then when I saw him drowning, as though you should grant my own life and the life of my two sons with me, and not lay any more trouble on me.

“When the giant was drowned I went in, and I took with me all he had of gold and silver, and I went home, and surely great joy was on my people when I arrived. And as a sign now look, the finger is off me.”

“Yes, indeed, Conall, you are wordy and wise,” said the king. “I see the finger is off you. You have freed your

two sons, but tell me a case in which you ever were that is harder than to be looking on your son being hanged tomorrow, and you shall get the soul of your eldest son.”

“Then went my father,” said Conall, “and he got me a wife, and I was married. I went to hunt. I was going beside the sea, and I saw an island over in the midst of the loch, and I came there where a boat was with a rope before her, and a rope behind her, and many precious things within her. I looked myself on the boat to see how I might get part of them. I put in the one foot, and the other foot was on the ground, and when I raised my head what was it but the boat over in the middle of the loch, and she never stopped till she reached the island. When I went out of the boat the boat returned where she was before. I did not know now what I should do. The place was without meat or clothing, without the appearance of a house on it.

I came out on the top of a hill. Then I came to a glen; I saw in it, at the bottom of a hollow, a woman with a child, and the child was naked on her knee, and she had a knife in her hand. She tried to put the knife to the throat of the babe, and the babe began to laugh in her face, and she began to cry, and she threw the knife behind her. I thought to myself that I was near my foe and far from my friends, and I called to the woman, ‘What are you doing here?’

And she said to me, ‘What brought you here?’

I told her myself word upon word how I came. ‘Well then,’ said she, ‘it was so I came also.’ She showed me to the place where I should come in where she was.

I went in, and I said to her, ‘What was the matter that you were putting the knife on the neck of the child?’

‘It is that he must be cooked for the giant who is here, or else no more of my world will be before me.’ Just then we could be hearing the footsteps of the giant, ‘What shall I do? what shall I do?’ cried the woman. I went to the caldron, and by luck it was not hot, so in it I got just as the brute came in. ‘Hast thou boiled that youngster for me?’ he cried.

‘He’s not done yet,’ said she, and I cried out from the caldron, ‘Mammy, mammy, it’s boiling I am.’ Then the giant laughed out HAI, HAW, HOGARAICH, and heaped on wood under the caldron.

“And now I was sure I would scald before I could get out of that. As fortune favoured me, the brute slept beside

the caldron. There I was scalded by the bottom of the caldron. When she perceived that he was asleep, she set her mouth quietly to the hole that was in the lid, and she said to me 'was I alive?' I said I was. I put up my head, and the hole in the lid was so large, that my head went through easily. Everything was coming easily with me till I began to bring up my hips. I left the skin of my hips behind me, but I came out. When I got out of the caldron I knew not what to do; and she said to me that there was no weapon that would kill him but his own weapon. I began to draw his spear and every breath that he drew I thought I would be down his throat, and when his breath came out I was back again just as far. But with every ill that befell me I got the spear loosed from him.

Then I was as one under a bundle of straw in a great wind for I could not manage the spear. And it was fearful to look on the brute, who had but one eye in the midst of his face; and it was not agreeable for the like of me to attack him. I drew the dart as best I could, and I set it in his eye. When he felt this he gave his head a lift, and he struck the other end of the dart on the top of the cave, and it went through to the back of his head. And he fell cold dead where he was; and you may be sure, oh king, that joy was on me. I myself and the woman went out on clear ground, and we passed the night there. I went and got the boat with which I came, and she was no way lightened, and took the woman and the child over on dry land; and I returned home."

The king of Lochlann's mother was putting on a fire at this time, and listening to Conall telling the tale about the child.

"Is it you," said she, "that were there?"

"Well then," said he, "'twas I."

"Och! och!" said she, "'twas I that was there, and the king is the child whose life you saved; and it is to you that life thanks should be given." Then they took great joy.

The king said, "Oh, Conall, you came through great hardships. And now the brown horse is yours, and his sack full of the most precious things that are in my treasury."

They lay down that night, and if it was early that Conall rose, it was earlier than that that the queen was on foot making ready. He got the brown horse and his sack full of gold and silver and stones of great price, and then Conall and his three sons went away, and they returned home to the Erin realm of gladness. He left the gold

and silver in his house, and he went with the horse to the king. They were good friends evermore. He returned home to his wife, and they set in order a feast; and that was a feast if ever there was one, oh son and brother.

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