

Lugh at the Gates of Tara: Gamal's Tale

Presented to Whispering Lake Grove for Lughnassadh, August 5th, 2018

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Look at this lot! A rowdy crowd, to be sure. In my time, we were more discriminating who we allowed into our gatherings. A person had to be of quality... of value... to be admitted.

Then again, this is no High King's court. I'm sure you're all fine folk, worth something in your own way. But none of you is Tuatha De Danann. I know you've no bard the equal of our Ogma, or a smith like Goibniu, and certainly no leader like King Nuada.

And no one living is the equal of Lugh Samildanach, the many-skilled. No one living back then was, either. Master of all skills. High King in his time. Unequaled in battle.

But at first, when Lugh came to the gates of Teamhair at Tara, in Eireann, we didn't know his quality. It was my job, with my partner, Camal -- I'm Gamal, by the way -- to guard the doors of that hall. We kept out undesirables, folk with nothing to offer. And we certainly weren't about to let in some stranger, handsome as he might be.

I said to him, "Who are you?" and he replies, "I am Lugh, son of Cian of the Tuatha de Danann and of Ethlinn, daughter of Balor, a King of the Fomor."

Now, I knew who Balor was. A one-eyed hideous monster, that's what. And I knew Cian personally: a clever man and a handsome one. But Balor's daughter? I doubted their son would look so pretty. And that's assuming Cian *did* manage to sneak past the twelve guards Balor had stationed around his daughter. He wasn't just a protective father. He'd heard a prophecy that his grandson would kill him someday.

So, I'm already skeptical. But then this stranger goes on: "I am the foster-son of Tailte, daughter of the King of the Great Plain, and of Echaid the Rough."

I asked him, how did he get from a Fomorian mother to fostering with a Fir Bolg princess? He says, "Manannan mac Lir rescued me from the ocean when my mother set me afloat to escape my grandfather. He also raised me after my boyhood, alongside his sons."

Now, that's quite a pedigree. I figure that if he's not making it up, he must be an impressive young man. So, I asked him: "What can you do? Not just anyone comes into Teamhair. What are you worth? What do you bring to serve the king?"

Lugh said, "I have come to aid the Tuatha De Danann against the Fomorian oppressors. I am a skilled warrior, a master of strategy and unmatched at single combat."

I pointed at Camal and myself. “Look, we’re just the gatekeepers, and I think we could take you. We have plenty of even better warriors inside. King Nuada himself is a great strategist, and if he needs one, his brother Ogma is his champion.”

Next, he told us: “I am also a smith.”

I turned to Camal again. “He’s a smith! Oh, we don’t have one of those... wait, Goibniu is the greatest blacksmith in the land. Goldsmithing, bronze, silver...? Credne Cerd knows every metal. Try again.”

“A carpenter...”

“Luchtaine.”

“A boatwright...”

“You said you studied with Manannan mac Lir? Unless you’ve surpassed the master, then no.”

I give him credit, he wasn’t even irritated. He kept going, still hopeful. “I am a master bard, skilled with the harp, learned in lore, a poet and a storyteller.”

“Hey, I’m a storyteller, too! But Ogma is the king’s lore keeper, and what he doesn’t know isn’t worth knowing. The master harper here is Cas Corach, and many other fine musicians and poets are already here.”

“I am learned in the magic arts.”

“Hey, Camal, he’s a magician! Or is it sorcerer? I get the two confused.” Camal doesn’t talk much, but he still nodded and laughed.

I told Lugh, “Let’s see, we have the great sorcerer Mathgen, the queen of the druids, Druantia, and the three sisters of the Badb. I’d really like to see you out-magic just one of *them*. No, really, I’d like to see it. That would be something.”

He wasn’t going away. He offered: “Do you have a master healer?”

“Dian Cécht. Supposedly, your grandfather?”

I think I finally got to him. A low thing, questioning his honesty, but come on.

Lugh tried one more time: “I could be the king’s cup-bearer.”

By then, I felt a little bad the boy, but I had to tell him, “The king has nine already, one for every river in Eireann.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but I think he realized I could go on all day. Instead, he threw back his cloak, struck a grand pose, and said: “I see you have masters of all skills here... but do you have one person who is master of *all* these skills at once?”

He got me there. Camal nudged me, and I had to give in. I mean, if Lugh *was* really all that he claimed, the king would want to meet him. It'd be my head if I let him get away. I sent Camal to tell King Nuada about this strange guest and the king told us to let him in.

You may guess how things went after that. The king put the young braggart to the test. And wouldn't you know, he passed every challenge? He beat the king's games master at Fidchell... something like your chess... and then defeated the king, personally.

Then he bested Ogma, the king's champion, at a test of strength, and took his badge of office. I know, because one of the stones Lugh tossed went through my door and away out of sight. He came running after and tossed it right back inside!

Finally, they handed Lugh a harp, and he played songs the like of which none had heard before, magical tunes that made the court drowse and weep and laugh as he chose.

The king declared Lugh the Ollamh Eireann, chief bard of the land and second only to himself in authority. He then put the command of his armies in Lugh's hands, bidding him train the troops in preparation for war against the Fomorian foe.

Eventually, that same Lugh led us into battle, slaying Balor... in accordance with the prophecy... and freeing us from the Fomorian oppression. When King Nuada died, Lugh became High King after him.

You can imagine how glad I am that I didn't turn him away. Yes, I gave him a hard time. But what if he'd been a Fomorian spy? Or simply a well-meaning but incompetent young man? Standards, like I said.

And something else... just because Lugh was a master of all skills doesn't mean he was the greatest at every one of them. He had to rely on Dian Cécht to tend to his troops in that war, after all. And I still say the Morrigan could out-magic him. I really would like to see that. After all, what she did to his son... another story, another time.

Lugh also had a few things to learn even after coming to Tara. King Nuada had to teach him caution and leadership, otherwise Lugh would have run to the front at the war's beginning. And I'm sure his eventual wife, Eriu, had a few things to teach him...

But the fact remains, no one was as many-talented as Lugh. Better, he gave due credit and honor to his many teachers. He began a harvest festival in honor of his first teacher, his foster-mother Tailtiu. This festival is still celebrated, though now named Lugh's Gathering, or Lughnasadh, in his honor. More, he constantly used his many skills in the service of others. And he was always willing to teach others as he himself was taught... which he still does today.

Pay attention to that teaching. Take up his offer. Maybe someday, you'll be worth something, too. After all, what will you answer, when you come to the Otherworld's gate, and the guard asks you: "Who are you? What are you worth? What skills do *you* offer?"