



INSIDE STORIES

Offline Story for Week 5

St. Collen & Gwynn ap Nudd

(Origin unknown)

A long time ago in Llangollen, near the Cardigan Coast of Wales, King Collen and his brave men struggled for four long years to fight off invading English armies, until the gracious King could stand the sight of blood no more. Too many men had died and his people were poor and malnourished because of the English blockade, so he sued for peace and when it was granted he gave up his throne and offered his life in service to the church.

After some time as Abbot of Glastonbury the pious man, longing for a life of greater austerity, left this high office and went out to preach the gospel to the common people of the land. Disheartened though by the extent of disbelief he came against everywhere he went, he eventually withdrew entirely to the mountains of his youth where he made himself a cell under a shelter of rock, in a remote and secluded spot en route to the Dolgoch Falls in Tywyn. Living peacefully there the humble man would make his way daily to the river below the energetic series of waterfalls, scoop up some of the precious crystalline liquid into a small ceramic amphora he had received from the Pope himself, bless the water, and place the container in a net that hung from his belt, then head back to his hovel to pray. When he heard passersby he would welcome them and bless them with a dab of this holy water to their forehead.

One day he heard two men on the path approaching his dwelling. They were in the middle of a loud debate over which king they should serve.

“I would serve the King of Annwn!” boasted the one.

“I would serve the King of Faeries!” declared the other.

“The King of the Otherworld is the King of the Faeries too,” offered the first.

“Well,” concluded the second, “If he is king of not just one but two kingdoms then I will serve him all the more!”

Collen could hold his tongue no longer, he put his head out of the window of his cell and called to the men, "Be careful! If you offer your allegiance to that devil, you will surely be cursed by God!"

"It is *you* who should be mindful, brother," replied the first, "For if you speak of the Good King in such a manner, then it will not be long before someone comes knocking at your door. And after that you might not be seen in this life again."

The monk had heard all the tricky tales about the Fair Folk of the hills but as a man of the cloth he had rendered them to superstition, believing now in the truth of the church, that if indeed these people existed it was in defiance of true religion and thereby they could be no less than souldead, at best, and demons at worst, nevertheless, Collen did not leave his hovel that day and could not help his eyes from flicking toward the door at every rustle of the wind outside that caused the encroaching oaks to beat their branches.

By eventide he had all but let go of his fears when, alas, there came a knock at the door. Though it grated against his penitent vow to welcome and bless all who passed his way, he didn't dare open his door. Whoever was calling on him did not knock again.

The next day Collen did not leave his cave again, but spent the whole day in fervent prayer, that he might overcome the beliefs of his old life. When evening came and the door was knocked on once more he started with fright, pulling his curtain to and backing away from the door. He still would not dare to open it, lest he find truth in any of his past customs.

Knowing for sure that his caller would come once more, but only at dusk, the next day Collen stole away to the waters of Dolgoch to refill his amphora and bless its contents, then he returned home to welcome his unavoidable guest, thinking that this time the caller might not be so patient, might not stop at simply knocking at his door. As he sat and waited he accepted it to be God's will that he should go and see the truth of the Hillfolk for himself, so that afterwards he could preach more knowingly about their devilry.

When twilight brought his expected caller, Collen opened the door and welcomed him faithfully, offering to bless the red robed man. Turning his blessing down politely, the man extended an invitation from his king that Collen should visit upon his lands and people to see for himself how blessed they were.

Accepting the summons, for that was surely what it was, the monk went with the man, travelling up through the trees along routes he had never seen before, until they emerged onto the greenest of green hillocks, all but glowing emerald in the full day sun. All about them were

the fairest of people, healthy and hearty as can be. Young and old their cheeks were rosy and their skin unblemished as they went about their business. The old were yet robust, working with the strength of the young, the young ones carefree and fit and every one of them smiling or singing or dancing as they went. Each one of them though, old or young, wore tunics of either deep red or pale blue.

On account of this, despite being quite taken by all he saw, Collen would not, whenever it was offered to him, partake of any food, even though it looked fresh and juicy, or of any drink, though it seemed to sparkle with goodness in every drop.

At the end of the day Collen was brought before the King of Annwn himself, Gwynn ap Nudd, and asked what he thought of his kingdom. Collen complimented the king on all that he saw but would not, when it was offered, with great magnanimity, take up a position beside the King, as his equal. Without reproach the king suggested that Collen stay another day to see if he might change his mind.

As diverting as this next day amongst the Faery People was, witnessing their jubilant play and seeing their exuberant dancing, Collen continued to take note of their red and blue robes and, hence, to take heed of all that the church had taught him, never joining in with their play and never entering in with their dances and, still holding to his fast, not accepting any food or drink that was offered to him.

Once again Collen complimented the king on all he saw when Gwynn ap Nudd asked that night what he thought of his kingdom, and once again he declined the king's offer to join him as an equal. Still no reproach was given by the king who, as with the day before, suggested that Collen remain with them for one more turn of the sun.

Though there was much to feast his eyes on that last day, Collen maintained his fast and kept a watchful distance from any of the Hill Peoples' sport, always wary of the red and blue clothes they wore, a sure reminder of all the church had instilled in him.

This time when Gwynn ap Nudd genially extended his hand in friendship, asking Collen's view of his kingdom, the monk gathered his courage and spoke boldly, saying, "Your land is indeed beautiful and your people seem well enough except that they are draped all the while in red and blue, and blue is with certainty the colour of *death* and red is with certainty the colour of the *devil!*" Gathering up and uncorking his amphora as he spoke, Collen cast the holy water over the king and his audience and, each and every one of them, right there and then, altogether disappeared so that the monk stood alone on a green hillock.

'Annwn' reads as An-oo-n

'Nudd' reads as N-oo-th

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