

Cúchulann

Thousands of years ago on the Emerald Isle, there was an army called the Red Branch Knights. These soldiers were brave and strong. For many years, they were the bravest and strongest in all of Ireland. They were the envy of all other kings and the personal army of Conor MacNessa, the king of Ulster. MacNessa trained a group of boys known as the Macra, who would train in the art of war and battle each other on the hurling pitch. They all knew that those who showed promise could one day hope to be promoted to a Red Branch Knight.

Far away from the king's fort, a young boy named Setanta grew restless. As the king's nephew, he felt he had a right to fight in his army, but his mother was far too protective. Whenever he pestered her to allow him to join the Macra, she would come up with a new excuse.

"It's too far," she'd wail.

"The boys are too big and strong," she would howl.

"It is raining, and you'll catch a cold."

These arguments continued for many months until, eventually, she relented and allowed him to leave the family home and make the long journey to join his uncle's young army.

It didn't take the eager boy long to impress with his fighting and hurling skills; not only was he proficient with a sword, but he could also throw the sliotar farther and more accurately than any of the other Macra. He continued to work hard and practise and, one spring evening, a local blacksmith named Culann invited the king and a small number of his army to feast at his hall. His majesty caught Setanta after training one morning and asked him to join him at the feast. The young boy's cheeks burned red, and he could only mumble a reply. For the rest of the day, he wore a smile like a crescent moon. He was so elated that he organised a hurling match with his friends.

"Setanta, we must get going if we are to make it to the blacksmiths on time," the king bellowed across the field when the match threatened to eat into the night.

The boy indicated that he would catch up with the king and the others once the match was over and his uncle set out to meet their host for the evening. It didn't take long for him to grow tired of the game, but the knights were far ahead, and Setanta had to race to beat the darkness that nipped at his heels. When he finally arrived at the

blacksmith's house, he found that the door was barred; however, he could tell from the noises within the hall that the feast had already begun.

Unbeknown to Setanta, the king had forgotten that his nephew had been set to join them and had allowed their host to lock his doors for the night. Even worse, he'd released his great wolf-hound to stalk the grounds. While he knocked on the door, Setanta heard a deep rumble in the trees behind him. Turning, he found himself face to face with a snarling mouth filled with yellowing teeth. Without thinking, and before the beast could attack, he hurled his sliotar as hard as he could. His aim was perfect, and the great dog fell to the ground.

Worrying about the grave trouble he would be in, Setanta looked down at the animal. He turned to see the broad-shouldered blacksmith fall to his knees and cradle his fallen companion. "Who will guard my house now?" he sobbed.

"I am responsible for the death of this beloved animal," Setanta began. "I will guard your house until the day I die. I will be your hound."

Culann rose to his feet and shook the boy's hand. "For this service, I shall give you a new name. A brave name. You shall be called Cúchulann, the hound of Culann."

True to his word, Cúchulann went on to become one of the greatest warriors in the Red Branch Knights and fought bravely for Culann until the day he died.

INFERENCE

1. Why were other kings jealous of the Red Branch Knights?
2. What do you think Setanta's relationship with his mother was like? Why?
3. Why did Setanta's cheeks burn red?
4. Why did Setanta worry about the trouble he would be in?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

Where was the king heading with Setanta?

V

Find out what a "sliotar" is.

V

Can you use the word "pestered" in the present tense?

R

Why couldn't Setanta enter the hall?

E

Explain how killing the dog benefited Setanta.

Answers:

1. They were brave and strong
2. She loved him but they fought a lot - they argued and she was overprotective
3. He was proud and embarrassed to be singled out
4. Because he had killed such a treasure animal

R: The blacksmith

V: A solid wood, leather covered ball used in the game of hurling

V: Any sentence using the word "pesters" or "pestering" in the present tense

R: The door had been locked

E: He went on to become a brave and famous knight