

“I am cold, I am cold”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last piece I began the tale of ‘Each-Uisge Pholl nan Craobhan’. This was a supernatural black horse that lived in Pot Cravie in the Spey and terrorised the neighbourhood. The tale is told in John MacDougall’s ‘Highland Fairy Legends’. Every year, if you recall, the water-horse would claim a human victim, then disappear for a year and a day. A peat-cutter called Iain Beag sought the advice of a witch called the black wife of Alnaic, and, consulting her *clach-fhiosachd* or divining-stone, she explained how he could get at the horse if he disguised himself as a *damh* (ox) and approached the pool as the horse emerged from it at sunset on *feasgar Bealltuinne*, Beltane Eve.

Iain Beag did as he was told. He got hold of the horse’s glittering bridle (*fhuair e greim air an t-srèin loinnirich*), pulled it off, and caught him by the forelock (*rug e air a bhad-mullaich air*). “Ha, ha, my lad, I have you now,” he said.

The horse answered: “You do indeed, but if you show me the same kindness as your other animals, I’ll serve you faithfully day and night till you give me back my own bridle and saddle by the hand of a virgin (*gus an toir thu air ais dhomh mo shrian agus mo dhiollaid féin le làimh maighdinn*), and then I’ll trouble the country no more.”

“We’ll see about that,” says Iain Beag.

His wife was terrified when she saw the awful beast (*am beathach uamhasach*) being led to the stable, but Iain assured her that the horse would make their fortune. He hid the bridle and saddle (*an t-srian agus an diollaid*) in a secret corner above the kitchen bed, and went to work. Sure enough, no road was too rough for the horse to tread, no load too heavy to carry, no fodder too coarse to eat. With his great sled-cart (*le a chàrn mor féin*) Iain could now empty the *Blàr Buidhe* of peats quicker even than the men of *Clachan Chromba*, the Clachan of Cromdale, could build them into stacks. People came calling with offers to buy the horse for large sums of money, but Iain refused them all. He was doing very well.

Their daughter Sine Bhàn came to love the black horse. She began feeding him with her own hand, and Iain Beag allowed her to ride him as far as the water. One day Iain and his wife went to a fair at the Clachan, leaving Sine to look after the house. As it happened, she lit upon the bridle and saddle (*thuit dhi amas air an t-srèin agus air an diollaid*) where they lay concealed. Now was her chance, she thought, of having a good long ride on the black horse’s back. Away she went with the bridle and saddle (*air falbh ghabh i leis an t-srèin agus leis an diollaid*) to the stable.

When the horse saw his gear (*uidheam*) he neighed with delight. Sine had him in harness (*chuireadh e fo uidheam*) in no time, but as soon as she was seated on the saddle, away he went with the swiftness of the wind — not to Poll nan Craobhan but to a lochan near the Clachan of Cromdale. As they were going through Achroisk (*Ath Chroisg*) they came by Little John and his wife, and the horse cried out as he passed them, “I have now got my bridle and saddle from the hands of a virgin (*Fhuair mi nis mo shrian agus mo dhiollaid o làimh maighdinn*), and I’ll trouble no man any more.”

The horse and the girl were seen plunging headlong into the deepest part of the lochan, where many believed it had no bottom at all. It was the last that was ever seen of Sine Bhàn or of the water-horse of Poll nan Craobhan, but, as MacDougall tells it, there is a very romantic postscript, which I can’t resist giving in his own words.

“It was observed,” says MacDougall, “that the part of the Lochan in which the black horse disappeared with Sheena Vane never froze over, however thick the ice might be on the surrounding water.

“In the cold winter nights, when the wind blew strong, and swept the snow in blinding clouds from Cromdale Hill, an eerie, piteous cry of: ‘I am cold, I am cold,’ was heard above the noise of the storm, coming from the Lochan and sending a cold chill through the hearts of those that heard it. Year after year the same mournful cry was heard, until a smith from Glen Braon came and settled in the Clachan.

“This smith had been taught by the black wife of Alnaic how to speak to ghosts; and when he first heard the piteous cry, he said that he would soon see what the ghost was wanting. He went out to the Lochan, and used the words he had learned from the black wife of Alnaic; and the ghost told him that it could find no rest until the priest had said seven masses for the soul of Sheena Vane.

“The mass was said, and the eerie cry of: ‘I am cold, I am cold,’ was not heard thereafter. The Lochan is called to this day Bog-an-Loirein; and the place where Little John of the Yellow Moss lived, Dalchapple (*Dail-a’-chapuill*, Horsefield).”

Well, well. If I may re-apply a celebrated remark made of Alexander Carmichael’s ‘Carmina Gadelica’ by the late John Lorne Campbell, this story is clearly ‘a literary and not a literal presentation of Gaelic folklore’. It has almost too many motifs in it. The black horse’s disappearance for ‘a year and a day’ is a signal that the horse dwelt in the otherworld. The entrances to that otherworld included the river-pool called Poll nan Craobhan and the lochan called Bog an Loirein. These entrances suggest a curious mixture of Lowland and Highland tradition, because Lowland kelpies live in river-pools, while the Highland *each-uisge* lives in a shallow moorland loch. In fact, other surviving traditions about Poll nan Craobhan are not in Gaelic but in Scots, notably an extremely ‘cool’ and well-designed road safety message that warned with heavy irony of the dangers of the pool under its anglicised name, Pot Cravie:

*And sit weel, Janetie,  
And ride weel, Davie,*

*And your first stop will be  
The bottom of Pot Cravie.*

It's the traditional equivalent of a modern biker, his lass tucked in behind him, rounding a corner at an angle of thirty degrees on the wrong side of the road. Steal a horse, young Davie; hang on tight, young Janetie; and you know what you'll do? You'll break your necks.

The black wife's divining stone, Little John's ox-hide and the water-horse's punctual appearance at sunset on the eve of the quarterday suggest that the storyteller had been busy selecting the most classic symbols of 'inbetweenness' that he could find in a folklore handbook — charm-stone for penetrating the secrets of the otherworld; man disguised as beast, as was done ritually at the likes of Hallowe'en and the New Year; crack in time through which otherworld creatures penetrate our own. In fact, the term *feasgar* (as opposed to *oidhche*) *Bealltuine* which MacDougall uses for Beltane eve sounds distinctly untraditional to me. But it would be wrong to be entirely cynical. The Alnaic is a rugged stream that flows into the Avon at Delnabo, near Tomintoul, and the area between there and Cromdale was still strongly Gaelic-speaking in MacDougall's day.

In particular, there's no reason why the story's 'material culture' should have been falsified. What we are told, clearly and simply, is that our sleek black water-horse appears not only to have a saddle (*diollaid*) on his back but also a glittering bridle (*srian*) on his head without bit (*sparrag*) or chin-strap (*smeachan*). It is therefore easy to pull off, which leaves the creature under the farmer's control as long as he keeps the bridle from him. He will serve the farmer faithfully until he receives three things — his own bridle, his own saddle, and a virgin — whereupon he will go away and trouble the country no more.

With this final motif, the virgin, we have slipped momentarily from our tale-type 'Water-Horse and Farmer' into the tale-type 'Water-Horse and Woman', which tells, you will recall, how the water-horse comes from his loch in the form of a handsome young man to seduce a young girl and (presumably) bring her back to the otherworld as breeding-stock. But we must focus now on this bridle on the water-horse's head, without bit or chin-strap; nor should we forget the saddle. The position, after all, is not quite what we would expect. This supernatural horse comes from his watery otherworld ready saddled and bridled. The farmer (or, in this case, peat-cutter) gains control of the water-horse not by saddling and bridling it, which is what we would expect, but by the opposite — removing a saddle and bridle-cap which are already there. In other words, the bridle-cap, in particular, appears to be a magic or ritual object which contains the source of the creature's power.

It is therefore of great interest, I think, that the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh possesses just such a pony-cap. It's a beautiful bronze object with holes for the horse's eyes and ears, and has been dated to the 3rd century BC. It was found in a bog at the farm of Torrs in the parish of Kelton, close to Castle Douglas in Galloway, about 1820, and presented to Sir Walter Scott by the local exciseman.

The whole parish of Kelton sounds as if it would repay study from the point of view of water-horse traditions. I quote from the account of the Torrs Pony-Cap in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland of 1870: "On the farm of Torrs there is an imperfect circle of upright stones, the remains of a Druidical temple, in the neighbourhood of which there is a copious spring of excellent water . . . Various antiquities, of different ages, have been found in the parish. Numerous hill forts occur on different hill tops. A sepulchral tumulus opened near Gelston (towards the south of the parish), contained a stone coffin 7 feet in length, in which was found human bones, a brass or copper helmet, with several implements of war, that were greatly corroded . . . Near Glenlochar Bridge . . . was turned up by the ploughshare, several years since, the head of a war horse in bronze . . . And lastly, the loch of Carlingwarth, with its islands and crannogs, has furnished many relics of antiquity in bronze and iron . . ."

It's a safe bet, I think, that what is now called Carlingwarth Loch at Castle Douglas was once regarded as a haunt of the water-horse, be it the *each-uisge* of the Gael or the kelpie of the Britons. Many a hoard of priceless Celtic metalwork has been found under water in different parts of Europe. Gifts to the otherworld, ferociously guarded by the water-horse? Replacements for human sacrifice?

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