



# THE WATER-HORSE OF BARRA

*Scottish folktale as told by  
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Once upon a time there lived a water-horse on the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides, which lie off the west coast of Scotland.

Now a water-horse, people believed, had magic powers, so that he could live happily in his home at the bottom of a loch, but when he swam up to the surface and reached dry land, then he could gallop about as an ordinary horse, or he could change himself into a man, just as he pleased.

This water-horse was a magnificent black creature with long legs, brown eyes, and a splendid flowing mane, and because he was very good-natured and never caused anyone any harm, he got on well with the fairies who lived in a nearby hill, and with the humans who lived in a hamlet not far away, and earned a living by farming and fishing.

After several hundred years, however, the water-horse began to feel lonely. The fairies had moved from their underground home because people no longer believed in them, and whenever he changed himself

into a young man, human beings did not seem to be as friendly as they once had been, saying that they had no time to sit and talk with him because they had to see to the milking, or start ploughing, or set snares for rabbits, or search for bait, or put the children to bed.

“What I need is a wife,” the water-horse thought. “Every morning I’ll catch fresh fish for breakfast, and in case she does not like raw fish as I do, I shall build a fireplace and a chimney in my house at the bottom of the loch, and she can sit in front of it and cook meals on it, just as all humans do.”

Rising to the surface of the loch, he shook the water from his magnificent black mane, and galloped off through the reeds and right across the island, looking to right and to left in search of a suitable wife.

There were not many girls on Barra and each one seemed to have something wrong with her, from the water-horse’s point of view. This one was too fat and so would be lazy, that one too thin and would eat too much. Another was too tall, a fourth too small, and a fifth so ugly that the water-horse knew he could never bear to see her face every morning across the breakfast table. He was, you see, a very particular water-horse, and having lived alone for so many hundred years, he had grown rather selfish, so that never for one moment did he consider what the girls might think of him.

Just when he was on the point of giving up hope of ever finding a bride to please him, he saw a girl sitting in the heather, watching over her father’s cows, and knitting industriously. Around her the bees

murmured softly as they searched for honey, forming a pleasant musical background to the busy click clack of the needles.

This girl was neither too fat nor too thin, too tall nor too small and she had grey eyes that were made for laughing and a red mouth that was made for smiling, so that the water-horse fell in love with her immediately, and knew that he had found just the kind of wife he wanted.

Never stopping to consider what ideas on the subject the girl might have, he galloped across to her, whinnied, and tossed his magnificent black mane.

“What a splendid creature you are,” the girl said, and putting down her knitting, she stood up and began to stroke the neck of the water-horse and then, to her dismay, found that she could not take her hand away.

Because she was clever as well as being pretty, she realised immediately that this was no ordinary horse, and that by touching it, she had put herself in its power.

“You are the prettiest girl in Barra,” the water-horse said. “Your eyes are as grey as the waters of my loch in midwinter, your hair as yellow as the sands on the shore, and your skin as white as the waterlilies which unfold their buds every summer. I have, therefore, decided to make you my wife.”

“How kind of you,” the girl answered politely, knowing that she would need to have her wits about her to free herself from the magic of the water-horse. “However, if I am to live at the bottom of a loch for the

rest of my life, I hope you won't mind if I just finish knitting these socks to keep my feet warm."

"Of course not," the water-horse said, equally politely.

"Sit down in the heather beside me, and rest a little in the sunshine, while I turn this heel," the girl said.

Immediately the water-horse changed himself into a handsome young man with hair as black as the raven's wing, and brown eyes which were strangely cold and selfish from living alone for hundreds of years.

"Help me, bees," the girl murmured, as the young man sat down in the heather beside her, and because the bees knew that it was she who gave them a home in the hard days of winter, they flew backwards and forwards, singing drowsily of the hot sunshine and the scent of the heather and the softly nodding heads of the harebells so that all the young man wanted was to fall asleep there and then.

When he had yawned for the third time, the girl said:

"Yours must be a very busy and strenuous life. While I am finishing this foot, why don't you stretch out in the heather and sleep a little?"

"What a good idea," the young man said, and the next moment he was sound asleep in the sunshine, and having done what the girl had asked them, the bees flew off on their search for yet more honey.

"He really is extremely handsome," the girl thought, looking down at the sleeping young man, "but I have no intention of marrying a water-horse and spending the rest of my life at the bottom of a loch," and she beckoned to the nearest of her father's cows.

“Help me, cow,” she whispered, and because the cow knew that it was she who watched over them in the daytime, and milked them every morning and evening, she bent her head.

“Take the rope halter from my neck,” the cow said, “and place it over the head of the young man. He will then change back into a water-horse, and be in your power as long as the halter is there.”

Taking the halter from the cow’s neck, the girl placed it over the head of the sleeping young man. Immediately he awoke and changed back into a water-horse, but because he now was in her power, he could no longer speak, and could only look at her with sad, rather selfish brown eyes.

“And now you must learn your lesson, water-horse,” the girl said. “It may have been all right to carry off a girl and marry her when you first came to live in the loch, but things have changed a great deal since those days.”

She led the water-horse off to her father’s farm.

“I have brought you the best horse you have ever seen, or ever are likely to see, to work for you,” she said. “But remember this. Never take off the cow halter from his neck, no matter how sadly he may look at you. And now you must bring in the cows yourself and milk them, because I am off to consult the Wise Man of Barra, and with your permission I shall take him the bowl of crowdie which I made yesterday.”

Wrapping the bowl of cream cheese carefully in a clean cloth, she set off to consult the Wise Man, who had the Sight and could foretell what the future held.

“There is nothing to be done now,” the Wise Man said. “Bring the water-horse to me when you hear the cuckoo sing over Barra and I’ll see what can be done then.” And he grabbed the crowdie and shut the door firmly in her face.

Rather sadly—because it was many years since the cuckoo had been heard over Barra—the girl returned to her farm and her work there, and if she was not particularly happy, her father certainly was, because the water-horse did the work of seven ordinary horses and ate hardly anything at all.

“In seven years this horse will have made my fortune,” he rejoiced, “and then I shall take him to the horse market at Castlebay and sell him for a good sum.”

But the girl had other ideas. To a water-horse, seven years might seem like only one day, but to her they were a very long time, and anyway she had no intention of allowing her father to sell the creature.

Every night, when the horse had finished working on the farm and was tied up by the cow halter in its stable, she would go down and feed and groom him, and as she brushed his long, black mane, she would talk to him of all the work which had been done that day on the farm and of all that they were planning to do. Sometimes she would sing to him songs that the island women sang as they spun and wove, as they churned the butter and made the cheese, or as they rocked their babies

to sleep; and all the time she was with him, the water-horse would listen attentively and stare at her with brown eyes which, little by little, grew less cold and less selfish.

Exactly a year and a day after the water-horse had gone in search of a wife, the girl heard the cuckoo singing over the island and she knew then that the time had come. Again she fed and groomed the horse, but this night she led him out of the stable and, holding the cow halter in one hand, mounted his back and rode him to the Wise Man, taking with her a bag of fine oatmeal of her own grinding.

“Take off the cow harness,” the Wise Man commanded, as he opened his door to her knocking.

“But then we shall be in his power,” the girl said.

“Take off the cow harness,” the Wise Man repeated, having looked into the brown eyes of the water-horse and having seen what he had seen.

Nervously the girl took off the cow harness and immediately the water-horse changed into a young man—taller and stronger than he had been before, because of all the hard work he had done for the girl’s father. His hair was as black as the raven’s wing, his skin burned brown by the sun and the wind, and his eyes, which once had been so cold and selfish, now were full of love and entreaty.

“What have you to say to me?” the Wise Man asked the young man.

“A year and a day ago I wished to carry off this girl and make her my wife,” the young man said. “Since then she has talked to me of her father’s farm, and I myself have worked long hours there. I have learned

how very different her life is from mine, and now I know that never could she be happy in my home at the bottom of the loch.

“When the fairies left Barra, I should have gone too, for now, alas! there is no place for either fairies or water-horses in the Western Islands.”

“If you have learned that, you have learned much,” the Wise Man said. “Supposing you had gone away with the fairies, what place would you have gone to?”

“Tir-nan-Og, the Land of Youth, where no one is unhappy and no one grows old,” the young man answered.

“You are still free to go to Tir-nan-Og,” the Wise Man reminded him, and then, as the young man hesitated, continued, “or you can give up the magic of the old gods and become a man, to love like one and grow old like one.”

“How is that possible?” the young man asked.

“Drink this potion which I have brewed from honey and the juices of seven times seven herbs, all gathered when the old moon held the new moon in her arms. For twenty-four hours you will sleep, and when you awaken, the magic will have gone and you will be only a man.”

The young man turned to the girl.

“Your eyes are as grey as the waters of my loch in midwinter,” he said. “Your hair is as yellow as the sands on the shore, your skin as white as the water-lilies which unfold their buds every summer. If I became a man, would you marry me?”

“Gladly,” the girl answered, knowing that the water-horse had learned his lesson, that his love was so great that he would give up his place in Tir-nan-Og to stay on Barra and marry her.

Taking the potion from the Wise Man, the young man drank it in a single gulp, and immediately fell into a deep sleep, and for twenty-four hours the girl sat by his side, watching over him, while the magic drained out of him. When he awoke he was a human being and had no recollection of ever being a water-horse or living at the bottom of the loch.

Now, while the farmer grieved at the loss of his remarkable horse, he rejoiced that his daughter had found herself such a strong and handsome husband who was prepared to work from dawn till dusk, and longer, if need be, and so he set the pair of them up in a farm on the far side of the island, and there they lived happily for many a long year, and for all I know, some of their grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, or great-great-grandchildren may be living there still.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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**Why does the water-horse stop being cold and selfish after working on the farm?**

- What “lesson” does the girl want the water-horse to learn? (5)
- Why does the water-horse “listen attentively” as the girl talks and sings about work on the farm? (7)
- Why isn’t the water-horse angry that the girl put him under her power and made him work for her father?
- Why does the water-horse decide he would rather become a man than go to Tir-nan-Og?