Celtic Folk and Fairy Tales

To Colin, Mirren and Gowan: thank you for
all your love and support during the challenges
of the past five years. – L.D.

To my illustration professor Seo Gyoung-Kim for leading me
toward children's book illustration. To my sisters Amélie and
Colleen and my friend Grace for being so supportive. To my parents
for encouraging me (even when I drew on the bunk bed),
and especially my mom, Birgit, for just being the best. – E.C.

The artwork in this book was hand-drawn with pencil and coloured digitally.

First published in 2025 by Floris Books. First published in the USA in 2026. Text © 2025 Lari Don
Illustrations © 2025 Elise Carmichael. Additional artworking by Arianna Gelloni. Lari Don and Elise Carmichael have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988 to be identified as the Author and Illustrator of this Work. All rights reserved
No part of this book may be reproduced without the prior permission of Floris Books, Edinburgh www.florisbooks.co.uk
Authorised EU Representative: Easy Access System Europe, Mustamae tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia gpsr.requests@easproject.com
British Library CIP data available ISBN 978-178250-962-2 Printed in Poland through Hussar

Floris Books supports sustainably sourced paper efforts and uses plant-based inks to reduce chemical emissions.

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper | Supporting responsible forestry FSC® C167221

Celtic Folk and Fairy Tales

Magical Stories from Scotland,
Ireland, Wales, Cornwall,
the Isle of Man and Brittany

RETOLD BY
Lari Don

ILLUSTRATED BY
Elise Carmichael

Floris Books



Contents

Introduction 6

How to Escape a Waterhorse *Isle of Man* 8

The Fairy Babysitter *Brittany* 20

Merlin and the Dragons *Wales* 32

The Selkie Hunter *Scotland* 44

The Monster Trap *Wales* 62

Duffy and the Dizzy Imp *Cornwall* 78

The Children of Lir *Ireland* 96

The Piskie Market *Cornwall* 110

The Giant's Eye *Ireland* 116

How to Trick a Changeling *Scotland* 128

Background to the Tales 136

Glossary 140

About the Author and Illustrator 142

Introduction

Welcome to a world of magic and danger, battles and beauty: the world of Celtic tales!

Over time, there have been several possible meanings for the word 'Celtic'. In this book, Celtic refers to lands on the western coastal edge of Europe – Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Cornwall and Brittany – where languages that are described as Celtic are now, or recently have been, spoken. These Celtic languages – Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Manx, Cornish and Breton – are connected to rich and ancient storytelling traditions.

There are so many fabulous tales from all over the Celtic lands, it wasn't easy choosing just ten to share in this book. I've selected tales about the most exciting and compelling aspects of Celtic folklore, including fairies, shapeshifters, monsters, powerful women, giants and curses. These also happen to be my own favourite kinds of myths and folktales for telling out loud to audiences in castles, classrooms, even caves...

Some of these stories are told, in slightly different ways, across several of the Celtic lands, like tales of waterhorses, selkies and changelings; some are set in very specific places, like the tragedy of the Children of Lir.

All of these tales have been passed down through many generations and have changed a wee bit each time they are told, so I've changed them a wee bit too.

At the start of most stories, you can find help with the pronunciation of names that might be unfamiliar. At the back of the book, you can find the meanings of a few local and historical words, and information about where I found and how I retold each tale.

In the pages between here and there, I invite you to join me on an adventure in the dramatic and inspiring world of my favourite Celtic tales!

Lari x

How to Escape a Waterhorse

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Kirree, who lived with her father on a small farm by the coast of the Isle of Man. Kirree had never been to sea, but her father had been a sailor when he was young, and his sea-faring friends often visited the farm.

Sailors are splendid storytellers, and their visitors told Kirree stories from other Celtic lands. So Kirree knew that the same magic and the same monsters could appear in tales from different places, sometimes with different names. Waterhorses galloped into lots of stories, stealing people away to be their food or their servants.

ceffyl dŵr = kef-ill dooh-r **Dafydd** = Dav-ith **Diarmuid** = Deer-mid
each-uisce = akh-ISH-keh **loch** = lokh **glashtin** = glash-chen

Donald told her about the Scottish kelpie, who could shapeshift into a beautiful horse or a beautiful person to lure children into lochs.

Dafydd told her about the Welsh ceffyl dŵr, who drowned those who dared to harness it to carts or ploughs.

Diarmuid told her about the Irish each-uisce, who dragged riders into the sea to devour them.

Kirree's father would nod and say there were Manx waterhorses too, and tell tales about the local glashtins, who were as handsome and dangerous as any of their Celtic cousins.

All the storytellers agreed there were ways to escape from waterhorses, in their human or horse form: by leaping over running water, waiting for morning cock-crow, waving a Bible or wielding an iron blade.

Kirree knew that these tales were centuries old and that most magic stayed safely in stories. She loved listening to the tales because she was sure she'd never meet a waterhorse.



Then one evening, just after Kirree's sixteenth summer, a storm started to roll in from the sea. Wind and rain battered the farm cottage, as Kirree cooked supper for her father and herself.

They heard a loud *knock knock knock*.

Her father opened the door. A young man, no older than Kirree, was standing outside. His old-fashioned clothes were made from fine fabrics – blue silks and green velvets, with silver buttons – all dripping with water. His long dark hair was heavy and wet, half-covering his face.

He spoke in a language they didn't understand. But Kirree's father said, "It's alright, we know what you need: a fire and hot food. Come on in."

Because in those days, everyone knew that offering shelter to strangers in a storm was simply the right thing to do.

The young man squelched in and sat by the fire to dry. He watched Kirree as she stirred soup, sliced bread and served supper. He nodded in approval and smiled in thanks.

After supper, Kirree's father dozed off, as he usually did after a day in the fields.

Kirree darned holes in socks and sewed buttons on shirts.

The young man watched her careful stitching, still nodding in approval. Then he started to doze too, in the warmth of the fire.

Kirree could still hear the wind and rain. The storm wasn't dying down yet, but someone had to do the evening chores. She went outside to close up for the night, leaving her father and the stranger asleep by the fire.

She crossed the farmyard, running through the rain and the splashes of moonlight thrown down as clouds raced across the sky. She rattled the farm gate to check that it was shut. She ran to the barn and made sure that the little red cockerel they were fattening up for Christmas dinner was roosting in the rafters, and that the tools were clean and put away tidily. She closed the barn door and ran back towards her sewing and the fire.



As she opened the cottage door, a gust of wind blew in with her.

The blast of air whirled round the cottage, snatched at the sleeping stranger's fine dry hair and lifted it off his face. Kirree caught a glimpse of one of his ears.

It was a long ear. A pointed ear. A hairy ear.

It was a horse's ear.

Now Kirree knew what her father had invited into their home...

A waterhorse, a glashtin, in human form.



She stood very still in the doorway and whispered, "Dad! Dad!" Her father didn't wake up.

She whispered louder. "Daaaad!" He still didn't wake.

But the glashtin woke.

He opened his storm-grey eyes, stared at Kirree and leapt to his feet.

Kirree knew she needed something to drive him away. What did the stories say?

Running water? But the nearest stream was two fields away.

Cock-crow? But the cockerel was asleep in the barn and wouldn't wake until dawn.

A Bible? There was one in her father's room. Iron blades? There were knives on the table and needles in her sewing box. But the waterhorse was standing between her and anything useful in the cottage.

The glashtin took a step towards her.

Kirree turned and ran outside. She had to lead the monster away from her sleeping father; she had to find something to defend her family and her farm.

There were iron tools in the barn! She sprinted across the farmyard with the waterhorse chasing her.

Kirree flung the barn door open and reached inside for the nearest iron-bladed tool.

But the waterhorse grabbed her arm before she could grab a spade or a scythe.

They stood in the barn doorway, with the wind and rain blowing round them. The glashtin spoke to Kirree in that strange language, his voice low and soothing, like her father's voice when he was calming animals on the farm.

The glashtin mimed to her: stirring, slicing, serving, sewing. Then he pointed to Kirree, pointed towards the storm-whipped sea, and mimed again: stirring, slicing, serving, sewing.

Kirree thought, "Does he want me to work for him in his underwater home? I suppose being a waterhorse's servant is better than being a waterhorse's supper, but it's not what I was planning for my life."

She shook her head.

The glashtin pulled a string of pearls from his coat pocket and offered the necklace to Kirree. The pearls' delicate sheen glistened in the moonlight.

"No," she said. "I won't work for you under the sea, even if my wages would be pearls."

The waterhorse snarled, shoved the pearls into his pocket and tried to drag Kirree away from the barn.

Kirree dug her heels in and yelled, "Dad!" But her father didn't answer.

The waterhorse hauled even harder.

Kirree grabbed the doorframe and held on tight.

The waterhorse roared in frustration, revealing lots of long sharp teeth. Kirree wondered if he'd eaten his last servant.

She yelled even louder. "DAD!" But her voice was carried away by the wind.

The waterhorse hauled again. Kirree's fingers started to slip from the doorframe.

This was her last chance to escape.



So Kirree said, “Maybe I will have those pearls after all.” She turned and seized the necklace, which was dangling from the glashtin’s pocket.

She flung the string of pearls high up in the air, aiming straight at the rafter where the little red cockerel was sleeping.

The whirling pearls whacked the cockerel, then the necklace fell to the ground.

The cockerel, rudely awoken and terribly offended, crowed his loudest *cock-a-doodle-doo*.



And the waterhorse – thinking it was dawn, when he must be back in the sea – howled with rage, let go of Kirree’s arm and ran off.

Her father was woken by the early cock-crow and rushed outside.

He found Kirree standing in the farmyard. She whispered, “The stranger was a glashtin.”

Kirree and her father stood together in the rain-soaked moonlight and watched the waterhorse run away, shapeshifting bit by bit as he ran.

His legs shifted first, into a horse's back legs, to hurdle the farm gate.

Then his arms shifted into a horse's front legs, and his feet and hands became hooves.

Next his torso shifted, so it was a horse's body with a man's head that galloped to the shore.

Finally, his human head shifted, just as the huge dark stallion leapt into the wild stormy waves.

As the storm died down, Kirree showed her father the necklace and told him how the cock-crow had driven the glashtin away.

Her father hugged her. "You were saved by your own cleverness and that bird's voice. I think we should eat something else for our Christmas dinner."

So the little red cockerel lived a long and happy life, as did Kirree and her father.

But the string of pearls only lasted that one night. Kirree laid the necklace on her windowsill when she went to bed, and when true dawn came, the pearls turned to sea foam and drifted away on the breeze.

Kirree didn't mind. She'd never wanted to earn wages from a waterhorse anyway. And now she had a story of her own to share with their next visitor.