

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE AND THE WATER KELPIE

John Graham of Morphie was a proud man; he was kin to the great Marquis of Montrose and decided he should have a grand house to reflect his social status. Morphie lies near St Cyrus, the border between Kincardineshire and Forfarshire. All that remains today is a farmhouse called Morphie, all because the laird himself tangled with a water kelpie.

A kelpie or Each-Uisge is a water spirit capable of assuming different forms, sometimes a tall, dark, handsome man, at others, a beautiful black horse. In the latter form, the kelpie would entice people to climb on his back, whereupon he would instantly dive into the nearest river or loch and drown them, feasting on their remains underwater. Kelpies were supernaturally strong creatures and the Laird of Morphie knew of a kelpie who lived at Ponnage Pool, a salmon pool in the North Esk river, near Marykirk. He thought that if he could somehow capture the kelpie, he could force him to build his new mansion. So Morphie went to visit a local witch to ask how he might achieve this.

“Ah, the water kelpie has one weakness, if you can cut off his bridle with cauld iron, and keep it from him, then he will be in your power till he regains it,” the old woman explained. “Ye maun creep up behind him and cut the bridle with one blow. He will pursue ye, but if ye protect your hame with rowan boughs, then he cannot cross yer threshold. Hide that bridle for as lang as ye would mak him your servant.”

Morphie gave the woman some silver coins and left, returning to his wife to tell her the news. “So, you must gather all the rowan branches you can and fix them above every door and window, but leave a window open at the rear of the house for me to climb into. The kelpie will hopefully tire himself out and then I will have control of him!” His wife was reluctant to have any dealings with such an uncanny beast, but she knew he had his heart set on a grand house and was too mean to pay stonemasons to do the job.

Next day, Morphie rode down to Ponnage Pool with his sharpest dagger which had a heavy hilt. He walked quietly to the water’s edge, leaving his horse out of sight. He could see the kelpie, standing as dozing horses do, with one back leg bent. Morphie approached as silently as he could, then hit kelpie hard above his right eye with the hilt of the dagger. Kelpie made a furious

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE AND THE WATER KELPIE

whinnying noise and stumbled, giving Morphie enough time to slash the bridle in half, and pull it away from Kelpie's head.

“Ye evil man, what mean ye by this?” Kelpie screamed in human words. “You are my servant now, Kelpie, and I command you to come with me!” Morphie stated as the beautiful black horse with a coat as dark as night regained his footing.



Image by kind permission of Sarah Birdsong

The Kelpie

“I’ll kill ye first!” Kelpie roared as Morphie whistled for his own beast and mounted with all speed. He rode back home with Kelpie fast on his heels. To his relief, he could see the house was festooned with rowan branches at every possible entrance and bound with red thread to complete the protective charm. Morphie leapt from his horse and sent it running for the stable as he charged around the back and climbed in the lower window his wife had left open for him.

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE AND THE WATER KELPIE

Kelpie arrived a moment later, pawing and snorting with rage, seeing he was thwarted by the rowan. He rushed round and round the house until eventually he collapsed. Over the next few weeks, the laird had him pulling huge granite boulders, lifting them into place, and miraculously creating Morphie's new mansion. Kelpie was exhausted; at the end of every day he begged Morphie to return his bridle, promising he would leave him alone, but the laird was unmoved.

Kelpie's shiny coat was soon dirty and matted. He lost weight, the laird only feeding him one bag of oats a day. He was as cruelly treated as any old farm cuddy and became angrier by the minute, vowing to have revenge. Eventually the mansion with its stately castellated walls was finished, and Morphie was as good as his word, returning the bridle to the kelpie. He made sure he was indoors and threw the repaired bridle out of the window. Kelpie seized it with his teeth and cast it up in the air, where it fell lightly back on his head. He turned and issued this frightening curse:

Sair back an sair banes,
Carryin the laird o Morphie's stanes!
But the laird o Morphie'll never thrive,
As lang as Kelpie is alive!

Morphie dismissed the curse, knowing he was protected with fresh rowan branches around his new house. But soon it was reported around the district that any who spotted the kelpie at Ponnage Pool heard him muttering the same curse, over and over.

The laird's life was thereafter blighted with sickness and trouble. His wife left him, taking their children with her. The house began to crumble, till eventually it collapsed, taking Morphie with it. Folk said this was all the kelpie's doing, and only the line of his daughter survived, the lands of Morphie ultimately landing in the hands of his distant kinsman who was descended from Barclay of Mathers.

Kelpies are very common in Scottish and Irish mythology, and there are many tales in Aberdeenshire concerning them. The Ponnage Pool Kelpie was referenced in the poetry of two local authors separated by over a hundred and fifty years, George Beattie of St Cyrus, writing in 1815, and Helen Burness Cruickshank of Hillside, Angus, in 1968. Helen's poetry collection published that year was entitled *The Ponnage Pool*.

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE
AND THE WATER KELPIE

The Kelpies is the name for the twin horse head sculpture by Andy Scott, a huge landmark on the river near Falkirk, inspired by the legend, but also modelled on two Clydesdale horses who lived at the Belwade World Horse Welfare Centre near Aboyne.

Beware any strange large black horses by rivers, they may look attractive, but they may be a water kelpie!