## The Horses of Lir

Roger Zelazny

*I sent this one to* The Saturday Evening Post. *Three times. They kept losing the ms. I stopped.*

The moonlight was muted and scattered by the mist above the loch. A chill breeze stirred the white tendrils to a sliding, skating motion upon the water’s surface. Staring into the dark depths, Randy smoothed his jacket several times, then stepped forward. He pursed his lips to begin and discovered that his throat was dry.

Sighing, almost with relief, he turned and walked back several paces. The night was especially soundless about him. He seated himself upon a rock, drew his pipe from his pocket and began to fill it.

What am I doing here? he asked himself How can I... ?

As he shielded his flame against the breeze, his gaze fell upon the heavy bronze ring with the Celtic design that he wore upon his forefinger.

It’s real enough, he thought, and it had been *his,* and *he* could do it. But this...

He dropped his hand. He did not want to think about the body lying in a shallow depression ten or twelve paces up the hillside behind him.

His Uncle Stephen had taken care of him for almost two years after the deaths of his parents, back in Philadelphia. He remembered the day he had come over—on that interminable plane flight—when the old man had met him at the airport in Glasgow. He had seemed shorter than Randy remembered, partly because he was a bit stooped he supposed. His hair was pure white and his skin had the weathered appearance of a man’s who had spent his life out-of-doors. Randy never learned his age.

Uncle Stephen had not embraced him. He had simply taken his hand, and his *gray* eyes had fixed upon his own for a moment as if searching for something. He had nodded then and looked away. It might have been then that Randy first noticed the ring.

“You’ll have a home with me, lad,” he had said. “Let’s get your bags.” There was a brief splashing noise out in the loch. Randy searched its mist-ridden surface but saw nothing.

They know. Somehow they know, he decided. What now?

During the ride to his home, his uncle had quickly learned that Randy’s knowledge of Gaelic was limited. He had determined to remedy the situation by speaking it with him almost exclusively. At first, this had annoyed Randy, who saw no use to it in a modern world. But the rudiments were there, words and phrases returned to him, and after several months he began to see a certain beauty in the Old Tongue. Now he cherished this knowledge—another thing he owed the old man.

He toyed with a small stone, cast it out over the waters, listened to it strike. Moments later, a much greater splash echoed it. Randy shuddered.

He had worked at his uncle’s boat-rental business all that summer. He had cleaned and caulked, painted and mended, spliced... He had taken out charters more and more often as the old man withdrew from this end of things.

“As Mary—rest her soul—never gave me children, it will be yours one day, Randy,” he had said. “Learn it well, and it will keep you for life. You will need something near here.”

“Why?” he had asked.

“One of us has always lived here.”

“Why should that be?”

Stephen had smiled.

“You will understand,” he said, “in time.”

But that time was slow in coming, and there were other things to puzzle him. About once a month, his uncle rose and departed before daybreak. He never mentioned his destination or responded to questions concerning it. He never returned before sundown, and Randy’s strongest suspicion did not survive because he never smelled of whisky when he came in.

Naturally, one day Randy followed him. He had never been forbidden to do it, though he strongly suspected it would meet with disapproval. So he was careful. Dressing hastily, he kept the old man in sight through the window as he headed off toward a stand of trees. He put out the CLOSED sign and moved through the chill predawn in that direction. He caught sight of him once again, briefly, and then Stephen vanished near a rocky area and Randy could find no trace of him after that. Half an hour later, he took down the sign and had breakfast.

Twice again he tried following him, and he lost him on both occasions. It irritated him that the old man could baffle him so thoroughly, and perhaps it bothered him even more that there was this piece of his life which he chose to keep closed to him—for as he worked with him and grew to know him better he felt an increasing fondness for his father’s older brother.

Then one morning Stephen roused him early.

“Get dressed,” he said. “I want you to come with me.”

That morning his uncle hung the CLOSED sign himself and Randy followed him through the trees, down among the rocks, past a cleverly disguised baffle, and down a long tunnel. Randy heard lapping sounds of water, and even before his uncle put a light to a lantern he knew from the echoes that he was in a fair-sized cave.

His eyes did not adjust immediately when the light spread. When they did, he realized that he was regarding an underground harbor. Nevertheless, it took longer for the possibility to occur to him that the peculiar object to his left might be some sort of boat in a kind of dry dock. He moved nearer and examined it while his uncle filled and lit another lantern.

It was flat bottomed and U shaped. What he had taken to be some sort of cart beneath it, though, proved a part of the thing itself. It had a wheel on either side. Great metal rings hung loosely on both sides and on the forward end. The vehicle was tilted, resting upon its curved edge. These structural matters, however, aroused but a superficial curiosity, for all other things were overwhelmed within him by a kind of awe at its beauty.

Its gunwales, or sides—depending on exactly what the thing was—were faced with thin bronze plates of amazing design. They looped and swirled in patterns vaguely reminiscent of some of the more abstract figures in the *Book of Kells,* embossed here and there with large studs. The open areas looked to be enameled—green and red in the flickering light.

He turned as his uncle approached.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said, smiling.

“It—it belongs in a museum!”

“No. It belongs right here.”

“What is it?”

Stephen produced a cloth and began to polish the plates.

“A chariot.”

“It doesn’t look exactly like any chariot I’ve seen pictures of. For one thing, it’s awfully big.”

Stephen chuckled.

“Ought to be. 'Tis the property of a god.”

Randy looked at him to see whether he was joking. From the lack of expression on his face, he knew that he was not.

“Whose—is it?” he asked.

“Lir, Lord of the Great Ocean. He sleeps now with the other Old Ones —most of the time.”

“What is it doing here?”

His uncle laughed again.

“Has to park it someplace now, doesn’t he?”

Randy ran his hand over the cold, smooth design on the side.

“I could almost believe you,” he said. “But what is your connection with it?”

“I go over it once a month, to clean it, polish it, keep it serviceable.”

“Why?”

“He may have need of it one day.”

“I mean, why you?”

He looked at his uncle again and saw that he was smiling.

“A member of our family has always done it,” he said, “since times before men wrote down history. It is a part of my duty.”

Randy looked at the chariot again.

“It would take an elephant to pull something that size.”

“An elephant is a land creature.”

“Then what... ?”

His uncle held up his hand beside the lantern, displaying the ring.

“I am the Keeper of the Horses of Lir, Randy. This is my emblem of office, though they would know me without it after all these years.”

Randy looked closely at the ring. Its designs were similar to those on the chariot.

“The Horses of Lir?” he asked.

His uncle nodded.

“Before he went to sleep with the other Old Ones, he put them to pasture here in the loch. It was given to an early ancestor of ours to have charge of them, to see that they do not forget.”

Randy’s head swam. He leaned against the chariot for support “Then all those stories, of—things—in the loch... ?”

“Are true,” Stephen finished. “There’s a whole family, a herd of them out there.” He gestured toward the water. “I call them periodically and talk to them and sing to them in the Old Tongue, to remind them.”

“Why did you bring me here, Uncle? Why tell me all these secret things?” Randy asked.

“I need help with the chariot. My hands are getting stiff,” he replied. “And there’s none else but you.”

Randy worked that day, polishing the vehicle, oiling enormous and peculiarly contrived harnesses that hung upon the wall. And his uncle’s last words bothered him more than a little.

The fog had thickened. There seemed to be shapes moving within it now —great slow shadows sliding by in the distance. He knew they were not a trick of the moonlight, for there had been another night such as this...

“Would you get your pullover, lad?” his uncle had said. “I’d like us to take a walk.”

“All right.”

He put down the book he had been reading and glanced at his watch. It was late. They were often in bed by this hour. Randy had only stayed up because his uncle had kept busy, undertaking a number of one-man jobs about the small cottage.

It was damp outside and somewhat chill. It had been raining that day. Now the fogs stirred about them, rolling in off the water.

As they made their way down the footpath toward the shore, Randy knew it was no idle stroll that his uncle had in mind. He followed his light to the left past the docking area, toward a secluded rocky point where the land fell away sharply to deep water. He found himself suddenly eager, anxious to learn something more of his uncle’s strange commitment to the place. He had grown steadily fonder of the old man in the time they had been together, and he found himself wanting to share more of his life.

They reached the point—darkness and mist and lapping water all about them—and Stephen placed his light upon the ground and seated himself on a stony ledge. He motioned for Randy to sit near him.

“Now, I don’t want you to leave my side, no matter what happens,” his uncle said.

“Okay.”

“And if you must talk, speak the Old Tongue.”

“I will.”

“I am going to call the Horses now.”

Randy stiffened. His uncle placed his hand upon his arm.

“You will be afraid, but remember that you will not be harmed so long as you stay with me and do whatever I tell you. You must be introduced. I am going to call them.”

Randy nodded in the pale light.

“Go ahead.”

He listened to the strange trilling noises his uncle made, and to the song that followed them. After a time, he heard a splashing, then he saw the advancing shadow... Big. Whatever it was, the thing was huge. Large enough to draw the chariot, he suddenly realized. If a person dare harness it...

The thing moved nearer. It had a long, thin neck atop its bulky form, he saw, as it suddenly raised its head high above the water, to sway there, regarding them through the shifting mist.

Randy gripped the ledge. He wanted to run but found that he could not move. It was not courage that kept him there. It was a fear so strong it paralyzed him, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

He looked at the Horse, hardly aware that his uncle was speaking softly in Erse now.

The figure continued to move before them, its head occasionally dipping partway toward them. He almost laughed as a wild vision of a snake-charming act passed through his head. The creature’s eyes were enormous, with glints of their small light reflected palely within them. Its head moved forward, then back. Forward...

The great head descended until it was so close that it was almost touching his uncle, who reached out and stroked it, continuing to speak softly all the while.

He realized abruptly that his uncle was speaking to him. For how long he had been, he did not know.

“... This one is Scafflech,” he was saying, “and the one beside him is Finntag...”

Randy had not realized until then that another of the beasts had arrived. Now, with a mighty effort, he drew his eyes from the great reptilian head which had turned toward him. Looking past it, he saw that a second of the creatures had come up and that it, also, was beginning to lean forward. And beyond it there were more splashing sounds, more gliding shadows parting the mists like the prows of Viking ships.

“.. And that one is Garwal. Talk to them, so they’ll know the sound of your voice.”

Randy felt that he could easily begin laughing hysterically. Instead, he found himself talking, as he would to a large, strange dog.

“That’s a good boy... Come on now... How are you? Good old fellow...”

Slowly he raised his hand and touched the leathery muzzle. Stephen had not asked him to. Why he had done it he was not certain, except that it had always seemed a part of the dog talk he was using and his hand had moved almost as if by reflex when he began it.

The first creature’s head moved even nearer to his own. He felt its breath upon his face.

“Randy’s my name, Scafflech,” he heard himself telling it. “Randy.. .”

That night he was introduced to eight of them, of various sizes and dispositions. After his uncle had dismissed them and they had departed, he simply sat there staring out over the water. The fear had gone with them. Now he felt only a kind of numbness.

Stephen stood, stooped, retrieved the light.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Randy nodded, rose slowly, and stumbled after him. He was certain that he would get no sleep that night, but when he got home and threw himself into bed the world went away almost immediately. He slept later than usual. He had no dreams that he could recall.

They were out there again now, waiting. He had seen them several times since but never alone. His uncle had taught him the songs, the guide words and phrases, but he had never been called upon to use them this way. Now, on this night so like the first, he was back, alone, and the fear was back, too. He looked down at the ring that he wore. Did they actually recognize it? Did it really hold some bit of the Old Magic? Or was it only a psychological crutch for the wearer?

One of the huge forms—Scafflech, perhaps—drew nearer and then hastily retreated. They had come without being called. They were waiting for his orders, and he clutched his pipe, which had long since gone out, and sat shaking.

Stephen had been ill much of the past month and had finally taken to his bed. At first, Randy had thought it to be influenza. But the old man’s condition had steadily worsened. Finally he had determined to get him a doctor.

But Stephen had refused, and Randy had gone along with it until just that morning, when his uncle had taken a turn for the worse.

“No way, lad. This is it,” he had finally told him. “A man sometimes has a way of knowing, and *we* always do. It is going to happen today, and it is very important that there be no doctor, that no one know for a time...”

“What do you mean?” Randy had said.

“With a doctor there would be a death certificate, maybe an autopsy, a burial. I can’t have that. You see, there is a special place set aside for me, for all of the Keepers... I want to join my fathers, in the place where the Old Ones sleep... It was promised—long ago...”

“Where? Where is this place?” he had asked.

“The Isles of the Blessed, out in the open sea... You must take me there...”

“Uncle,” he said, taking his hand, “I studied geography in school. There’s no such place. So how can I... ?”

“It troubled me once, too,” he said, “but I’ve been there... I took my own father, years ago... The Horses know the way...”

“The Horses! How could I—How could they—”

“The chariot... You must harness Scafflech and Finntag to the chariot and place my body within it. Bathe me first, and dress me in the clothes you’ll find in that chest...” He nodded toward an old sea chest in the corner. “Then mount to the driver’s stand, take up the reins, and tell them to take you to the Isles...”

Randy began to weep, a thing he had not done since his parents’ deaths —how long ago?

“Uncle, I can’t,” he said. “I’m afraid of them. They’re so big—”

“You must. I need this thing to know my rest.—And set one of the boats adrift. Later tell the people that I took it out...”

He wiped his uncle’s face with a towel. He listened to his deepening breathing.

“I’m scared,” he said.

“I know,” Stephen whispered. “But you’ll do it.”

“I—I’ll try.”

“And here.. .” His uncle handed him the ring. “You’ll need this—to show them you’re the new Keeper...”

Randy took the ring.

“Put it on.”

He did.

Stephen had placed his hand upon his head as he had leaned forward. “I pass this duty to you,” he said, “that you be Keeper of the Horses of Lir.”

Then his hand slipped away and he breathed deeply once again. He awakened twice after that, but not for long enough to converse at length. Finally, at sundown, he had died. Randy bathed him and clothed him as he had desired, weeping the while and not knowing whether it was for his sadness or his fear.

He had gone down to the cave to prepare the chariot. By lantern light he had taken down the great harnesses and affixed them to the rings in the manner his uncle had shown him. Now he had but to summon the Horses to this pool through the wide tunnel that twisted in from the loch, and there place the harnesses upon them...

He tried not to think about this part of things as he worked, adjusting the long leads, pushing the surprisingly light vehicle into position beside the water. Least of all did he wish to think of aquaplaning across the waves, drawn by those beasts, heading toward some mythical isle, his uncle’s body at his back.

He departed the cave and went to the docking area, where he rigged a small boat, unmoored it and towed it out some distance over the loch before releasing it. The mists were already rising by then. In the moonlight, the ring gleamed upon his finger.

He returned to the cottage for his uncle and bore him down to a cove near the water entrance to the cave. Then his nerve had failed, *he* had seated himself with his pipe and had not stirred since.

The splashing continued. The Horses were waiting. Then he thought of his uncle, who had given him a home, who had left him this strange duty...

He rose to his feet and approached the water. He held up his hand with the ring upon it.

“All right,” he said. “The time has come. Scafflech! Finntag! To the cave! To the place of the chariot! Now!”

Two forms drifted near, heads raised high upon their great necks.

I should have known it would not be that easy, he thought.

They swayed, looking down at him. He began addressing them as he had that first night. Slowly, their heads lowered. He waved the ring before them. Finally, when they were near enough, he reached out and stroked their necks. Then he repeated the instruction.

They withdrew quickly, turned, and headed off toward the tunnel. He moved away then, making for the land entrance to the place.

Inside, he found them waiting in the pool. He discovered then that he had to unfasten most of the harnessing from the chariot in order to fit it over them, and then secure it *once* again. It meant clambering up onto their backs. He removed his boots to do it. Their skin was strangely soft and slick beneath his feet, and they were docile now, as if bred to this business. He talked to them as he went about the work, rubbing their necks, humming the refrain to one of the old tunes.

He worked for the better part of an hour before everything was secure and he mounted the chariot and took up the reins.

“Out now,” he said. “Carefully. Slowly. Back to the cove.”

The wheels turned as the creatures moved away. He felt the reins jerk in his hands. The chariot advanced to the edge of the pool and continued on into the water. It floated. It drifted behind them toward the first bend and around it.

They moved through pitch blackness, but the beasts went carefully. The chariot never touched the rocky walls.

At length, they emerged into moonlight and mist over black water, and he guided them to the cove and halted them there.

“Wait now,” he said. “Right here.”

He climbed down and waded ashore. The water was cold, but he hardly noticed it. He mounted the slope to the place where his uncle lay and gathered him into his arms. Gently, he bore him down to the water’s edge and out again. He took hold of the reins with a surer grip.

“Off now,” he said. “You know the way! To the Isles of the Blessed! Take us there!”

They moved, slowly at first, through a long, sweeping turn that bore them out onto the misty breast of the loch. He heard splashings at either hand, and turning his head he saw that the other Horses were accompanying them.

They picked up speed. The beasts did seem to have a definite direction in mind. The mists swept by like a ghostly forest. For a moment, he almost felt as if he rode through some silent, mystical wood in times long out of mind

The mists towered and thickened. The waters sparkled. He gave the creatures their head. Even if he had known the way, it would have done him little good, for he could not see where they were going. He had assumed that they were heading for the Caledonian Canal, to cut across to the sea. But now he wondered. If the Keepers, down through the ages, had been transported to some strange island, how had it been accomplished in earlier times? The Canal, as he recalled, had only been dug sometime in the nineteenth century.

But as the moonlit mists swirled about him and the great beasts plunged ahead, he could almost believe that there was another way—a way that perhaps only the Horses knew. Was he being borne, somehow, to a place that only impinged occasionally upon normal existence?

How long they rode across the ghostly seascape, he could not tell. Hours, possibly. The moon had long since set, but now the sky paled and a bonfirelike sunrise began somewhere to the right. The mists dispersed and the chariot coursed the waves beneath a clear blue sky with no trace of land anywhere in sight.

The unharnessed Horses played about him as Scafflech and Finntag drew him steadily ahead. His legs and shoulders began to ache and the wind came hard upon him now, but still he gripped the reins, blinking against the drenching spray.

Finally, something appeared ahead. At first he could not be certain, but as they continued on it resolved itself into a clear image. It was an island, green trees upon its hills, white rocks along its wave-swept shores.

As they drew nearer, he saw that the island was but one among many, and they were passing this one by.

Two more islands slipped past before the Horses turned and made their way toward a stone quay at the back of a long inlet at the foot of a high green slope. Giant trees dotted the hillside and there were several near the harbor. As they drew up beside the quay, he could hear birds singing within them.

As he took hold of the stone wall, he saw that there were three men standing beneath the nearest tree, dressed in green and blue and gray.

They moved toward him, halting only when they had come alongside. He felt disinclined to look into their faces.

“Pass up our brother Keeper,” one of them said in the Old Tongue. Painfully, he raised his uncle’s soaked form and felt them lift it from his arms.

“Now come ashore yourself, for you are weary. Your steeds will be tended.”

He told the Horses to wait. He climbed out and followed the three figures along a flagged walk. One of them took him aside and led him into a small stone cottage while the others proceeded on, bearing his uncle’s form.

“Your garments are wet,” said the man. “Have this one,” and he passed him a light green—blue robe of the sort he himself had on, of the sort in which Randy had dressed his uncle for the journey. “Eat now. There is food upon the table,” the man continued, “and then there is the bed.” He gestured. “Sleep.”

Randy stripped and donned the garment he had been given. When he looked about again, he saw that he was alone. He went to the table, suddenly realizing that his appetite was enormous. Afterward, he slept.

It was dark when he awoke, and still. He got up and went to the door of the cottage. The moon had already risen, and the night had more stars in it than he could remember ever having seen before. A fragrant breeze came to him from off the sea.

“Good evening.”

One of the men was seated upon a stone bench beneath a nearby tree. He rose.

“Good evening.”

“Your Horses are harnessed. The chariot is ready to bear you back now.”

“My uncle... ?”

“He has come home. Your duty is discharged. I will walk with you to the sea.”

They moved back to the path, headed down to the quay. Randy saw the chariot, near to where he had left it, two of the Horses in harness before it. He realized with a start that he was able to tell that they were not Scafflech and Finntag. Other forms moved in the water nearby.

“It is good that two of the others travel the route in harness,” the man said, as if reading his mind, “and give the older ones a rest”

Randy nodded. He did not feel it appropriate to offer to shake hands. He climbed down into the chariot and untwisted the reins from the crossbar.

“Thank you,” he said, “for—everything. Take good care of him. Goodbye.”

“A man who dines and sleeps in the Isles of the Blessed always returns,” the other said. “Good night.”

Randy shook the reins and the Horses began to move. Soon they were in open water. The new Horses were fresh and spirited. Suddenly Randy found himself singing to them.

They sped east along the path of the moon.