



CLASSICS TO GO

**WITCH OF
THE GLENS**

SALLY WATSON

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Historical Note

To avoid confusion I have in this book described clan tartans more or less as they exist today. This is not strictly accurate. To begin with, in 1644 clans had not yet adopted specific tartans to be worn by all their members, and probably none of the tartans were the same, in either pattern or color, as they are today. In fact, it is very difficult to know just what they did look like, for all kinds of vegetable dyes were used, and the remnants of old tartans that we find today are so faded and changed in color that they seem mostly gray or gray-brown, and it is hard to tell what colors they once were.



THE PART OF *SCOTLAND* WHERE KELPIE'S ADVENTURE TOOK PLACE

1. The Gypsies

The people of Inverness were deeply annoyed. A number of them stood in the square and scowled with great hostility at the three tattered wanderers in their midst—but their anger held a wary quality.

“Tinklers! Gypsies!” they cried accusingly, and the soft, sibilant sound of the Gaelic was less soft but more sibilant than usual. “*Briosag!*” (“Witch!”) muttered some with conviction but caution. “Thieves!” they added, getting to the real heart of the annoyance. And with this fresh reminder of their grievances they began picking up stones as they advanced toward the man, woman, and girl.

Anyone who expected to see clan loyalty in this gypsy family would have been terribly disappointed. The massive bent shoulders and stringy legs of the man somehow evaporated between two houses, and the final glance from his pasty dark face was one of hooded derision.

Old Mina Faw didn’t seem at all put out by her man’s desertion. One might have thought she had expected it. Her scrawny figure seemed to grow taller as she turned a once-handsome hag face toward the crowd, and her sunken pale eyes flashed. The crowd hesitated. Everyone knew Old Mina was a witch, with the most devastating Evil Eye in all Scotland.

But surprisingly Mina chose to pacify them. After all, there weren’t many towns in the Highlands in this year of 1644, and it was well not to be alienating those few too deeply. “Och, now!” She wheedled the crowd in her thin but powerful voice. “Ye wouldn’t be wishing to harm a poor old woman, now, would ye?”

It wasn't at all that they weren't wishing to harm her. But no one wanted to risk having his hands fall off or his cattle die. They regarded her dubiously, making up their minds. "Witch!" repeated someone from the safety of the back. "Thief!" cried several more with fresh indignation, and they began to move forward again.

"Thief?" echoed Mina indignantly. "Not I! I would only be reading your palms and telling good fortune for ye. If anyone has been lifting your belongings, it must be my wicked wee Kelpie, whom I am beating every night for her sins." And she pointed accusingly at an undersized goblin-lass who might have been perhaps fifteen or seventeen years old, dressed in an outrageous assortment of faded scraps. Long black elf-locks flapped about her thin face and down her back. Eyes that were not quite canny peered out like those of an alarmed wee beast—or a witch.

The "wicked wee Kelpie" didn't stay to dispute the issue. With one bright, mutinous glance at Mina, she dived through the startled fringe of the crowd like a young stoat and ran away into the narrow steep lanes of the town.

The Inverness crowd promptly forgot Mina and took after the lass. "Thief!" they yelled with new enthusiasm. And whatever was convenient to pick up, they threw.

It was fortunate that Kelpie was experienced in this sort of thing, for it was a nasty chase, and she knew all too well what might happen if they caught her. With cunning amounting to sheer genius she ran and dodged, doubled back and forth between houses, wriggled over and under and around obstacles. Now and then her intense small face broke into a pointed grin of appreciation at her own cleverness—for there was something exhilarating in outwitting an entire town—but very real fear lurked behind those uncanny blue eyes. To tell the truth, it was the tide of ill will surging behind her which oppressed her even more

than the stones. But Kelpie did not realize this, for she was so used to ill will that she could not remember anything else.

As for Mina's deplorable behavior, Kelpie was annoyed but not in the least astonished. Mina had merely followed the law of self-preservation, the only law Kelpie knew. She herself would do the same thing, given the chance. It was the only way to stay alive.

"Briosag! Witch!"

Kelpie swerved round a corner and wished that she *were* a witch. If so, she wouldn't be running now but putting a braw spell on them all, causing their legs to buckle under them and stay that way for three days too, so that the whole town would be crawling about on hands and knees, just—She laughed at the picture and took another corner at full speed. Just wait until she *was* a witch! Och, no one would chase her then, or beat her, either....

A red petticoat spread on a gorse bush vanished magically as she flew past. Why not? If she got away, she was a petticoat richer. If not, what would it be mattering, a petticoat more, since she already had two stolen purses, a kerchief, and a fine *sgian dhu* on her anyhow?

Up hill and down and around, and finally away out of the town, and presently the stones ceased to bite at her ankles and back, and the yells were lost behind. Her breath seared her lungs now, and she hurtled down the hill toward the river which led from Loch Ness to Moray Firth. At last she threw herself into a cold, wet, but safely thick bank of broom, bracken, and juniper, where she lay panting and gasping painfully. Mina and Bogle would be safely away by now and waiting for her down along the path that was the only road along Loch Ness. Let them wait. She had earned a rest. She was sore bruised and aching

from the stones, and her bare feet, tough as they were, hurt from the cobbled streets of the town.

Och, she thought pleasantly, if only they would some day be catching and hanging Mina, and Bogle too—but only, of course, after Kelpie had learned all the witchcraft that Mina knew, and perhaps more. Oh, to be a more powerful witch than Mina, and to be putting all kinds of curses on her until all scores were settled!

Curled up in her nest of bracken, head resting on the scarlet petticoat, Kelpie drifted into her favorite daydream. *Dhé*, how Mina would plead for mercy! Her arms and legs would shrivel up, just, and her few remaining teeth fall out. Kelpie smiled, looking like a starry-eyed lass dreaming of romance. Then her short upper lip curled and lifted, revealing a row of small, sharp white teeth, so that she looked more like a wolf cub dreaming of dinner.

The long northern twilight was beginning to creep into the Great Glen, for sunlight vanished early in the valley between those high, steep, massive hills, even in March. She must go on now, or she would be beaten for delaying. And presently, still sore, she was loping silently down the path by the loch, where new gorse and bracken grew between patches of old snow. Two or three miles down she met Bogle and Mina sitting on their bundles and waiting.

“You have taken your time about getting here,” said Bogle. “And how many purses were you taking?”

Twilight had deepened into the toneless half-light of gloaming. Light had slowly drained from the Glen, leaving a world of eerie gray on the hill above Loch Ness. The loch itself was liquid iron, from which might easily arise the three black humps and snaky neck of the *each uisghe*, the water horse who lived there. A meager supper was over, and the only color left in the world was the small salmon-pink

pennant of cloud flying over the black shoulder of Meall Fuarvounie and reflected in the shining crystal ball in Mina's hand.

She spread a shabby bit of stolen black velvet on the springy turf and set the crystal sphere lovingly in the exact center. "And now you will be reading the glass with me," she said.

It was a nightly ritual. Ordinarily Kelpie found it interesting, exciting, but tonight she was sore and aching and rebellion was in her. It was foolish, of course, to express such feelings. It was to risk not only a beating—which, being used to, she did not fear—but an evil spell, which she did. But she expressed them now and then, all the same.

"May the *uruig* be away with you!" she said sweetly and ducked. Mina's fist merely caught the top of Kelpie's tangled head, but her snarl was more effective.

"Mind me so!" Her voice rasped. "And how do you think to be learning witchcraft else?"

"I am reading the crystal with you every night," muttered Kelpie. "But you'll never let me be trying alone, and you've taught me never so much as a single wee spell."

"And listen to her now!" The hateful voice was a croak of derision, echoed by a snort from the bulky gray shadow that was Bogle. "She cannot crawl yet and she is wanting to run!" And this time the blow fell on Kelpie's high, thin cheekbone before she could think to duck. "Look into the crystal, *amadain!*"

Kelpie considered further defiance and then decided against it. She didn't really feel up to another beating tonight, and she did want to learn witchcraft. So she permitted Mina's long gnarled hand to clutch her own so that Kelpie would be able to see what Mina did. For a seer could share his sight with another by touching him, and

Kelpie, said Mina, was not yet ready to see alone. Night after night, for as long as she could remember, Kelpie had looked into the ball with Mina, describing what she saw, while the old woman questioned and corrected her.

“Now,” said Mina, and Kelpie stared into the luminous ball. First it clouded, then the center began to glow dully, and then a vague picture developed. Kelpie’s dark head bent forward on its long neck, and her eyes grew wide and fixed....

Two young men were riding along a loch-side on fine horses, with a blond giant behind them on a shaggy Highland pony. Bright tartan *filleadh mór*—the bulky great-kilts—beat heavily against their thighs and swung over their shoulders, and their heads were high with the proud confidence of the well-born.

Kelpie recognized one of them. Young Glenfern, it was, whose father was a minor chieftain of Clan Cameron, and who had once given her a farthing and a sudden compassionate smile that lit his grave dark-eyed face like sunshine. The smile had roused in Kelpie a strange sensation of joy and resentment combined, and the feeling came back now as she stared. There was gladness behind the composure of his face as he rode, and his dark shoulder-length hair lifted in the breeze. And Kelpie, ignorant of the eternal attraction of lad for lass, frowned at the pleasant pain of her own feelings. She spared no more than a glance for the other young man in MacDonald tartan, whose narrow face seemed composed of straight lines, whose freckles matched the blaze of his red hair, whose expression seemed to laugh at all the world.

“Who is that?” muttered Mina, peering. “What will they be to us? Do you know them?”

“No,” lied Kelpie, whose policy was to deceive Mina and Bogle whenever possible, just on principle.

“I would be seeing something of the King, or the war, or Mac Cailein Mor,” said Mina fretfully.

Kelpie spared her a narrow, speculative glance. Why was Mina so interested of late in politics? Of what benefit to her was the blaze of civil war sweeping through the remote world of England and even the less remote world of the Lowlands? As far as Kelpie could see, it affected them not at all—except, of course, that Mac Cailein Mor, Marquis of Argyll, Chief of Clan Campbell, was head of the Covenant army of the Lowlands and therefore a merciless hunter of witches. But then Mac Cailein Mor came into these Western Highlands only now and then, and merely to wipe out here and there a few of the clans whom he had always hated. A terrible fierce enemy he was, no doubt, and one deserving the Evil Eye—but what was he to Mina, at all?

“Is it still the lads riding, then?” Mina persisted. “And who will they be, whatever?”

Always and always Kelpie must describe every detail, just as if Mina couldn’t see for herself. Kelpie was irritated. “How should I be knowing?” she snapped, and a blow on the ear set her head ringing.

“Don’t know! *Amadain!* What tartan will they be wearing?”

It was too much. Kelpie jerked away, too angry to care about the consequences. “*Nathrach!*” She spat. “Look for yourself!”

The motionless gray bulk in the shadows now stirred and gave a low, spiteful chuckle. “She cannot,” Bogle said, wheezing with satisfaction. “It is sure I am now; her Sight will be going from her. It was for that, these long years ago, that she must be stealing a wee bairn with the

ringed eyes of the Second Sight, and holding her hand so that she can see through other eyes what she cannot see for herself—”

There was a scream of fury from old Mina, and a battered saucepan hurtled through the dusk, hit Bogle’s ragged shoulder, and fell into the heather. Bogle chuckled with malicious triumph. It wasn’t that he hated Mina in particular. He was quite impartial, was Bogle; he simply hated all mankind and greatly enjoyed seeing anyone unhappy. Now he ducked his head slightly and shook with laughter as the saucepan was followed by an assortment of sticks, stolen objects, and curses.

Kelpie sat perfectly still. A universe of startling possibilities was opening to her mind—because, with Mina’s hand no longer touching hers, the tiny picture in the crystal glowed more sharply, brightly clear than she had ever seen it.

Wrapped in her tattered plaidie in a nest of last year’s dry bracken, she lay awake after the long gloaming had deepened to black and stars peeped out to grow dim again as the unearthly white radiance of the northern lights—the Dancers—shimmered and pulsed over the western hills. The wonder of the lights, as Kelpie watched, seemed to match the wonder in her heart.

Had Bogle told the truth? Mina’s behavior made Kelpie think he had. And it was certain that the crystal was even clearer for her without Mina’s touch.

So then, was it also true that she had been stolen? From where? Kelpie reached back into her memory but could find nothing but the vagrant life of gypsies—tramping, begging, stealing, telling fortunes and selling spells and charms in the

Highlands, running from witch-hunters in the Lowlands, sleeping under the sky.

Och, how could she ever be finding out? Only, perhaps, by becoming a greater witch than Mina and putting the power upon her. And indeed, it was a great advantage if Mina no longer had the Sight! *Dhé*, but she had other powers, had Mina, terrible powers of cursing and spells! She was clever, too, and for all her age she used a stick with great strength. Kelpie must be canny, she must so. The cold streams of the northern lights faded, and when they were gone, Kelpie was asleep.

2. The Waif

It was one of those days that couldn't decide between winter and spring. A cold, gusty wind whistled thinly through dark pine and barren birch and chased fat clouds over the sky one by one, causing flurries of hard rain to alternate with pale and hesitant sunshine.

They had traveled the thirty miles of Loch Ness, stopping at the village near Urquhart Castle, and again at Kilcummin, where they had nearly been caught picking the purse of one of the MacDonald chieftains. And now they were moving south beside the silver ripples of Loch Lochy.

Kelpie was far ahead of Mina and Bogle, moving along high on the hillside with a prancing motion caused partly by high spirits and partly by the masses of tough-stemmed heather that covered the slope. She was still sore from her latest beating, and also hungry. Her life consisted largely of pain and hunger and cold, and was peopled by enemies to be feared and hated or fools to be tricked, but Kelpie had discovered all that long ago and was quite used to the fact and found life very enjoyable anyway. Certainly it was never dull, and she had a zest for adventure.

And in spite of everything, the world was beautiful. Kelpie could forgive it a lot for that. In any case, her day was coming! She had deliberately described the details in last night's crystal quite wrongly, and Mina hadn't known.

Or had she?

This appalling thought caused Kelpie to miss her usually sure footing and to step right in the middle of a gorse bush. Neither the travel-hardened toughness of the bare brown foot nor the deceptive beauty of the silvery leaves saved

her from a good pricking, and Kelpie swore with an ardent fluency that would have pleased Bogle greatly. Still hopping and cursing, she saw the movement and color of the three horsemen down the loch much later than she should have. They were coming along toward her in the path below and doubtless had well-filled purses which might well be lightened. She was halfway down the steep slope when suddenly the sun shone brightly from behind the latest cloud, and Kelpie recognized the scene from the crystal: young Glenfern and his red-haired companion and the giant blond *ghillie* riding behind.

But there was no time to wonder about it. Timing her movements carefully, Kelpie threw herself headlong down the last steep bank and sprawled full length in the path, almost under the horses' feet.

"*Dhé!*" exclaimed Ian Cameron as he and Alex reined the horses so sharply that they reared for a moment on their hind legs. All he could see on the ground was a pitifully small and tattered figure, clearly in great danger of being trampled to death.

Alex MacDonald, from his better position behind, saw something a little more. As Ian's horse stepped alarmingly close to Kelpie, one "thin and helpless" arm moved, neatly and efficiently, the precise six inches required for safety. Alex's red eyebrows arched, and an appreciative grin danced on his face. He relaxed and prepared to enjoy the comedy that was sure to follow.

The crisis was over in a moment. "Is it all right you are?" demanded Ian of the wee figure, and the wee figure nodded biting its lip in a fine imitation of silent courage as it raised itself painfully to an elbow. For Kelpie had discovered that this sort of act was much more touching than loud wails and tears. She decided to have a hurt back, this being hard to disprove, as well as more impressive than other hurts. So

she winced to indicate great pain and looked up with a brave and pathetic smile.

The lads looked back at her. A scrawny waif it was, tattered and unbelievably dirty. The tangled dark hair, apparently never touched by water or comb, fell over the thin face in a way that reminded Ian of shaggy Highland cattle—except that these eyes were unlike those of any cattle that ever lived. They were long and black-fringed, set at a slant in the narrow face, and strangely ringed. Around each black pupil was a wide circle of smoky blue, then a narrow one of lightish gray, and a third of deep and vivid blue. Astonishing eyes, almost alarming! Where had he seen them before?

While Ian stared in wonder and pity, Alex made a few further observations of his own. He noted the high cheekbones and the pointed chin and the wicked slant of black brows and the short upper lip—giving rather the effect, thought Alex, of a wicked elfin creature, or perhaps a witch. Amused but wary, he sat back and let his foster brother make up his mind. Ian wouldn't have been noticing, of course, that the wee *briosag* threw herself into the path on purpose. Ian had the way of always believing the best of everyone.

Ian was aware of the cynical smile behind him. A nasty suspicious mind Alex had! It was a pity. What else could he be expecting of a poor wild waif like this? What sort of life must she have had? Then Ian remembered where he had seen her before: with that wicked old witch Mina. Och, the poor creature!

“‘Tis hurt you are,” he said worriedly, to Kelpie’s relief. She had feared for a moment that she’d been too subtle altogether.

“Och, only a little,” she whispered, putting on a brow show of dreadful pain heroically borne.

“Now, do not be overdoing it,” drawled Alex.

Kelpie shot him a look which, had she been a properly qualified witch, would surely have caused him to break out with every loathsome disease known to mankind. Unfortunately the only effect of her venomous glare was that Alex’s smile broadened to an insulting chuckle. Och, what a beast he was, then, with the bony, freckled, jeering face of him, and the two jaunty tufts of red hair jutting upward just where horns ought to sprout! She was about to tell him so, and in great detail, but just in time she remembered her role and Ian, who was still showing his pity and dismay.

What a misfortune, he thought, that this should happen now, just when he and Alex were nearly home again after those long months away in Oxford, where he had been savagely homesick. They were about to get home early, and with very important news, and now this had to happen, not five miles from Glenfern.

“What shall we be doing with you at all?” he said. “We cannot just be leaving her here!” he added fiercely, turning on Lachlan, the blond *ghillie*, who, looking larger than usual on his short shaggy pony, had muttered something from behind.

“Give her a copper,” Alex said, laughing, “and see how quickly she’ll mend!”

Copper indeed! thought Kelpie. It was silver she was wanting. But she didn’t hide the gleam in her eyes quickly enough.

“I’ll show you,” said Alex. Slowly, tantalizingly, he drew a coin from his sporran and held it up. It gleamed silver, and

Kelpie stared at it greedily. “See?” Alex chuckled and spun it toward her.

Quick as the flash of bright metal in the air, her brown hand shot out to catch it in flight—then dropped, and the coin fell noiselessly on the path. Kelpie sat staring first at it and then at her own shoulder with dismay that was, for a change, perfectly genuine.

“I—I *am* hurt!” she said with astonishment and then hastily snatched up the coin with her good left hand before they should change their minds.

“Not too hurt to be picking up the silver,” observed Alex, but the gibe lacked his earlier light tone. Ian had already dismounted and was touching rather gingerly the filthy rags covering the shoulder in question. The lass frankly stank.

This time Kelpie’s face showed an honest flicker of pain. “I think it will be sprained, or perhaps out of place,” Ian decided and looked at Alex.

Alex looked back at him. “Well, so. And where does she live, then? Where are her people? Perhaps Lachlan could be taking her home.”

Ian shrugged. “I think I’ve seen her with Old Mina and Black Bogle. Is that so?” he asked Kelpie, who nodded.

Alex raised his eyebrows, not in the least surprised. It was logical that she should belong to the nastiest witch in Scotland.

“Will they be coming along, then?” Ian inquired, and again Kelpie nodded, so bewildered by her unexpected hurt and the pain that was now shooting sharply through her shoulder that she couldn’t really think clearly at all.

A glum silence settled on them, broken only by furtive and disapproving mutters from Lachlan. His duty was to be protecting his young masters, and now here they were

consorting with witches, and he not able to prevent them at all, at all. He crossed himself.

Ian sighed with relief when the bent figures of Mina and Bogle appeared up the loch-side. They would take care of their lass, and he and Alex could be away home.

But it wasn't that easy. Mina, after taking in the situation at a glance, burst into lamentations and curses that caused the ruddy Lachlan to go pale. "And is it our poor lass you have harmed, wicked beasts that you are?" she wailed, while Bogle stood like a massive old tree in disconcerting silence. "Ocho, ocho, whatever shall we be doing now? May the Evil Eye fall on all your cattle, and the pox upon yourselves, *uruisgean* that you are!"

Ian himself recoiled, not from the curses, but from the evil that was in this horrible old woman. What a dreadful thing that a young lass should belong to such as these! It was wicked! And yet, what could he do? What could anyone do? Unhappily he stood and stroked his horse's nose while Alex handled the matter.

Alex did handle it beautifully, with just the right mixture of indulgence, severity, and money. "'Twas no fault of ours that she fell, but altogether her own," he told them. "Still, we are kind-hearted and willing to give you a bit of silver." And when Mina would have demanded more, he fixed her with a stern hazel stare that caused her own pale, muddy eyes to waver and fall. It was all settled then, and Ian, feeling depressed, turned to mount his horse.

And then Black Bogle, perhaps feeling that they had been worsted in the bargaining, reached down and jerked Kelpie roughly to her feet by the injured arm.

The bit of brutality wrenched a choked cry of anguish from the girl. Ian whirled around, and Alex was off his horse in a

flying leap and seized Bogle's arm in a grip that had no gentleness whatever.

"Let go of her, you vile bully!" Alex snarled, red with fury, while Ian removed the sagging Kelpie from Bogle's grasp. Lachlan, brandishing a steel dirk a foot long, loomed ominously behind....

When Kelpie was again able to take an active interest in events, she heard several voices: a cold, contemptuous one and a dangerously quiet one, Bogle's growl and Mina's whine, with dour grumblings in the background. More money changed hands, and then Mina bent over Kelpie, a cunning, complacent look on her face.

"The fine gentlemen will be taking you home with them to fix your hurt, and we will come to fetch you in the morning," she said. "You will be properly grateful—and behave as I'd be wishing you to," she added meaningly, and Kelpie nodded. She knew quite well what Mina meant—steal whatever she could lay hands on.

Then Ian's concerned face was close to hers as he removed the grimy once-red sash from about her waist and gently bound the injured arm to her side. "And who's knowing what further damage the brute will have done?" he muttered.

After that she found herself lifted to the fearful height of Alex's horse and felt his hard young arm firmly around her. And at a slow walk they set along toward the fork in the path that led through the hills to Glenfern.

By the time they reached the top of the pass, Kelpie was feeling much better. She began to relish the adventure, and she stared with interest at the scene before her as they paused. Ian's face was alight with joy, and Lachlan actually had tears in his eyes. A strange thing that was, she thought wonderingly, ignorant as she was of the love of the