

# The Witch of Clatteringshaws

Joan Aiken

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# Contents

Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Prologue

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve

Afterword  
Hobyahs and Tatzelwurms  
About the Author  
Also by Joan Aiken  
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## About the Book

The Witch of Clatteringshaws lives in Scotland in a disused Ladies Convenience – not at all convenient, the plumbing having long been smashed. In London, Simon Battersea, unhappily settled on the throne of England, is forced to live in St James's Palace with his good friend, Dido Twite. Never has Joan Aiken's wild imagination been more in evidence as Dido, travelling north to investigate a false claimant to the throne, is confronted by abandoned children, monsters and murderers, while Simon has to defend his country against invading Wends.

Their instinct to go north is a good one for it is the witch, Malise, who provides the key to everyone's troubles in a wonderfully swift and extravagant climax. A tremendous read and a truly satisfying ending to the Dido and Simon saga.

Joan Aiken  
The Witch of  
Clatteringshaws

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# *Prologue*

'THESE NAGS AIN'T fit to go no furder,' grumbled the driver of a heavy coach which had just reached the top of a long hill. 'Fit to swive, they be. And I could do with a bite of prog and a lay down.'

'But we cannot possibly stop here!' cried a faint female voice from inside the carriage. 'At the top of a hill! We are far too exposed—'

'*Got* to stop, ma'am. No choice about it. The nags is fair knackered. Besides which, look at the notice!'

'Notice? What notice?'

Grumbling loudly, the coachman climbed down from his box seat, unhooked a lantern and, crossing the track, shone its light so as to illuminate a sign on a post bearing the words:

NO FERRIES CROSSING TODAY  
ROAD CLOSED  
BEWARE OF HOBYAHS

'See!' he said. 'Can't go on. Can't cross the loch. Anyway, like I said, the team's fair wore out. I'll pull into the turnaround and give 'em a bait.'

'But this hilltop is no place to loiter. We are too much of a target!'

Ignoring his passenger's shrill protests, the coachman turned the carriage, led his team off the road, and parked in a grassy area, evidently intended for carts and coaches waiting for the ferry down below. A drystone wall enclosed

the coach park. Beyond it, the road ran steeply down to the water's edge, where there was a wooden slipway for embarking wheeled vehicles.

There were no people to be seen anywhere. The surface of the loch water was as smooth as black marble. Across on the farther side, peaks of mountains rose like sooty teeth against the pale night sky. A few lights showed at the water's edge on the opposite shore.

'What place is that across the water?'

'Clatteringshaws, ma'am. But we can't get there.'

'Is there no road? Along the side of the loch to where it narrows? Where there might be a bridge?'

'Tis a clear fifty miles to the nearest bridge, missus. And the road's only a farm track . . .'

'Oh, merciful heavens, what can we do? Hild, Hild, what can we do?'

A second woman's voice, harsh, exasperated.

'Do? Why, nothing, madam. We should never have set out. His Grace said not to. We shall have to spend the night here . . .'

During this speech a continuous low rumble, which had been audible in the distance behind them, now escalated into a violent crackle of musket fire and explosions of heavier artillery. To the south, where they had come from, the sky was patterned with brilliant lights, red, white and green.

'Oh, heavens, the battle! The battle! It is coming closer. Where can we hide?'

'There is nowhere.'

'Where is the driver? Why doesn't he speak? Where has he gone?'

'He has left us.'

'*Abandoned* us?'

'Made himself scarce.'

'Hild! What can we do?'

'There is not a thing to be done, Your Majesty.'

'But where has the driver gone off to?'

'He thinks there is a village ten miles along on this side of the loch.'

'Should we follow him?'

'How could you possibly walk ten miles? In your condition? Wearing high-heeled shoes?'

'Oh . . . Perhaps he will bring help. Perhaps there are kind people in the village.'

*'Perhaps!'*

During the silence that followed, the noise of battle grew louder. An experienced listener might have deduced that there were two armed forces, both moving north, exchanging fire as they moved, each seemingly trying to encircle the other on the bank of the loch. They were some miles distant, but coming steadily closer.

In a pause of the gunfire the voice of Hild could be heard, still impatient, but now with a touch of alarm:

'What is it, Your Majesty? What is the matter?'

'Oh! *Such a pain!*'

'Oh, no! Not that? But it is not yet time—'

'Oh! *Oh! OH!*'

A musket bullet shattered the window of the coach.

'Hild! *Hild!*'

*To: Father Sam,  
St Arling's Grotto,  
Wetlands,  
OHO 1BE*

*Dear old Cousin Smouel:*

*Why do I get the urge, every now and then, to write you a letter when I don't have the least expectation of any answer? can it be memories of those far-off days in Divinity College when we used to make up our own words to the hymns? Or is it the memory of the dreadful thing we did - didn't do - that caused us to be thrown out? You are the only*

*person I can really talk to – the fact that I don't even know if my letters find their way to you probably makes a difference too. I wonder if you are still in your little secret nook with the pinned-up message over the door that says STAY IN HERE . . . For all I know you are now sitting on a velvet cushion in the House of Lords! Anyway, good luck to you wherever you are, and spare a passing thought for your cousin, your witch-cousin Malise.*

*Yes, dear Smouel, I am still here in Caledonia, still doing the same job: District Witch. But, as I was looking out of my little window at the coach park, some squeak of a mouse or flash of a bird's wing reminded me of an evening fifteen years ago. (My life is very quiet here. Days, sometimes weeks, go by when nothing happens at all. When I do nothing but try to remember that tune. That fatal tune. Which I never can remember. Just now and then a neighbour comes by with a request for remedy, a love potion, a poison, an antidote.) Yes, I still live in the disused Ladies Convenience at the far end of the disused coach park looking over Loch Grieve. The Convenience is still not at all convenient, the plumbing long since smashed or stolen, the door lacks a lock, but it is home and I am used to it. The people across the water from time to time are taken by the impulse to tie me to a tree and burn me for a warlock, but the impulse generally dies away by the time they have paddled across the loch and climbed the hill, and they remember the Hobyahs who still live in the bank below and still come out at dusk; then they sensibly turn round and make for home. My health is good, as you can guess. Witches don't age . . .*

*Well, fifteen years ago I was looking out of my small dirty window, just as I was five minutes ago. Yes, at least there is glass in the window and I have a wooden box to sit on and a nail in the splintered door where I hang my broom and golf club. And some Anglo-Saxon chalk words to read if I ever get bored. And if I could understand them.*



*The mist slides across the loch in smooth layers like a tide coming in; it blurs the outline of the drystone wall. Across on the opposite shore the rocky hills poke out of the mist like islands floating in a white sea. (Those hills are where they were planning to make a bypass fifteen years ago - the engineers intended to bore a tunnel clean through. Of course it was going to cost xyz millions to do that, but they were quite happy about it because it would keep heavy traffic away from Clatteringshaws village centre and would not destroy its old-world charm. And they planned to borrow tunnelling equipment from another town where something similar had just been done. The people who lived in Clatteringshaws were not so happy because they feared that tourists would go along the bypass road and so the shopkeepers would lose trade.*

*I was anxious about it too, because of my friend Tatzen, who would be seriously inconvenienced by the tunnelling.*

*And some people who live far away in the south were worried because they feared that the beautiful hilly landscape would be spoiled. Why not make a bridge and take the new road through the disused coach park on the south side of the loch? they said. As the coach park was not in use? Why not take the road through it? why was the coach park not used, anyway?*

*Because of the Hobyahs.*

*Hobyahs? What are Hobyahs? Get rid of them.*

*Easier said than done.*

*Anyway, none of these plans were put into operation because of the battle of Follodden).*

*As I stood in my chilly Convenience, gazing out at the evening mist on that day fifteen years ago, I became aware of a cautious skinny figure, dressed in white, which was making its way silently and warily towards the waste bins.*

*Really there was no need to tiptoe, as this ferocious battle was being fought a few miles to the south, and the noise of cannon and musket fire and grenades quite*

*drowned the cries of gulls and the evening twitter of the birds. Yes, the battle of Follodden. You remember it, I'm sure.*

*People are always rather self-conscious about visiting the waste bins. They are still there now, a row of four against the drystone wall. They have labels on them: WICKER BOXES, BOTTLES, PAPER, GARMENTS. The bottle bin has three round holes for clear, brown and green. The paper bin has a hinged letter-box flap over its slot. And the garment bin has a massive, heavy, cylindrical drawer-like fitment. You pull it towards you by a brass handle, and when you have pushed in your bundle of trousers, or whatever, you let go of the handle and it swings upwards and shoots your offering down onto the pile inside. The bins are cleared by Council carts, which come every month at midday when the Hobyahs are not active, and the contents are sold or given away to the poor of the parish, who are glad to receive them, however ragged.*

*Hobyahs are not interested in the contents of the bins. It is true that Hobyahs enjoy a good mess; if clothes or bottles are left lying on the grass the Hobyahs will tear and smash and throw them all over the ground - but what they really go for is live meat.*

*Me? No, dear Smouel, the Hobyahs are not interested in me. Long ago they gave me up as a bad job. And they are afraid of my friend Tatzen over the loch. And they don't like my broom or my golf club; all the years they have hung outside my door they have never been touched.*

*People don't care to be seen dumping their bottles and cast-off clothes. They leave that task till the last possible moment before the Hobyahs come out of their holes . . . sometimes they leave it too late and then there is an unexplained disappearance. Sometimes that is blamed on me.*

*Well, I watched this thin, cautious, white-clad character making her way towards the GARMENT bin, and I soon came to*

*the conclusion that it was my sister Hild. You never forget a person's walk. We had not met since I ran away from home to enter the Seminary of the Three Secrets, where I met you, dear Smouel, but I could see that now was the time to break that silence.*

*I have a carrier pigeon so as to communicate with my friend Tätzen on the north side of the loch. And it will carry this letter to you by and by. I wrapped a message round its leg and launched it from my broken doorway. 'In the coach park by the garment bin. I'm going there now.' Then I floated over on my broom quicker and easier than a sprint.*

*I tapped Hild on the shoulder as she was in the act of pulling the brass handle, and said, 'I shouldn't do that if I were you.'*

*She jumped as if an arrow had hit her and said, 'why not?' And she added, 'what business is it of yours anyway? You nasty dirty low-down witch!'*

*I can't remember if you met my sister Hild. We never did get on when we were living as sisters in the same house. My sailor dad was drowned, you may remember, so then Ma married Stan Hugglepuck, who ran the Duke's Arms and later became provost. Hild was his daughter. There's a year between us, but she was always bigger and bossier, and Stan never took to me. One of the reason why I ran away to study the Ninefold path.*

*I said, 'Because they just emptied the garment bin yesterday. They won't be round again for a month.'*

*'What's that got to do—?' she began irritably, but then the whiter-wrapped bundle which she had been on the point of dropping into the brass cylinder stirred, and let out a thin whimper of sound. Our eyes met over the linen wrappings.*

*I said: 'He'd starve to death before the Council cart came again. Wouldn't be very nice for them to find his body.'*

*Hild snapped, 'How do you know it isn't a girl?'*

*To me, that didn't seem to make much difference. We stood and eyed each other.*

*At that moment there was a whistling overhead, like the wind in ships' rigging. Louder than the distant gunfire. We looked up. It was my friend Tatzen the otter-worm, circling overhead above us, letting out little puffs of hot flickering air.*

*Hild let out a terrified scream. Then she did a thing that really surprised me. Dropping the live bundle, she snatched my broom, mounted it inexpertly - I don't suppose she had ever ridden a broom in her life - and lit off, on a zigzag course, up into the air.*

*I thought, oh well, let her go - brooms are replaceable, after all - and I stooped to pick the bundle off the ground before the Hobyahs arrived.*

*It was letting out some perplexed, indignant yells.*

*Tatzen had done a U-turn and went after Hild, who was riding jerkily in the direction of the loch. It seemed likely that he would overtake and grab her before she reached the waterside.*

*She looked back, saw him, and dived downwards. Vanished into a bank of mist.*

*And that was a mistake because the Hobyahs were beginning to stir under the thick vapour which lay like frost on a cake over the grassy slope. You could see the mist stirring and humping as they moved about, coming out of their burrows, waking, rubbing their big bulging eyes. Scratching the ground with their claws. Grinding their teeth.*

*I heard a shrill scream, and then a lot of short, frantic cries.*

*Then silence.*

*Tatzen turned and came back to settle beside me in the coach park. Stretching his short stumpy legs and his long furry neck, he studied the bundle in my arms.*

*'Hold it a minute,' says I, 'while I go and look in the coach.'*

*For there was a mud-splashed coach and four exhausted horses parked by the entrance.*