



## The Witches of Kintail

contributed by Sheila Douglas

*Sheila comments: This story was learned from the late Angus Russell, who told it all over Scotland and England in the Folk Revival. My telling of it is my own, as I hope everyone else's will be. There are other versions of this story in the Scots and Gaelic tradition.*



Donald was a crofter-fisherman in Wester Ross on the shores of Loch Duich, which is a sea-loch. He lived on what he grew on his croft and the fish he caught. One day he was fishing on the loch and he was catching nothing at all, which in those days was very unusual. He cast his net and drew it in, over and over again. But not a fish did he get. He was so determined to catch something that he stayed out on the water longer than he was in the habit of doing and forgot to do what is absolutely necessary for a fisherman – to keep an eye on the weather. A wee black cloud that appeared on the horizon came quickly nearer and nearer. Violent little storms can blow up very quickly on the West Coast and this is just what happened in this case. Before he knew it, his boat was running before the wind and rain and tossing about on angry waves. He saw that he was being blown towards the opposite shore of the loch which was a mercy as, if he had been carried towards its mouth, he would have been taken out to sea and lost. He hung on like grim death and was nearly at the other side when – crash! His boat hit a rock under the water, sprang several leaks and sank very quickly.

Now Donald was in trouble for, like many fishermen at that time, he couldn't swim. They had a superstition that, if they learned to swim, they would have to swim. He might well have drowned had he not been near enough the shore to touch the bottom with his toe. Hardly able to believe his luck, he pulled himself out of the water onto the rocks and lay there exhausted. But he knew he couldn't just lie there or he would die of cold. He staggered to his feet and began to climb up the foreshore and towards the track that led along the lochside. To get back to his own croft, he would have to walk miles up one side of the loch and down the other and that would take hours. He wouldn't get home that day. But he was not too worried, for he had lived there all his life and knew where all his neighbours lived. It was now getting dark and folk would be starting to light their lamps, so he began to look for any cottage with a lit window. He saw one on the side of the hill, but was puzzled because he couldn't remember a cottage



being there before. Still, it was the nearest one, so he climbed up towards it.

What a fright he got when he looked inside! Three ugly old hags were sitting round a table, supping brose from a large wooden cog with pewter spoons. He had no idea who they were, but he minded a story his granny had told him about the Witches of Kintail, and they certainly answered the description! He was afraid to knock at the door, but there was such a cheerful big fire burning in the room and any food would have been welcome to Donald at that time, so he plucked up the courage at last. "Come in!" called a cracked but kindly voice. "It isn't locked." People in the Highlands never used to lock their doors and always welcomed strangers. They believed one day Christ might come by and it would never do to turn him away.

Donald went into the room and the three hags rose and welcomed him with friendly if toothless grins, their noses and chins fit to crack nuts. They gave him dry clothes and sat him by the roaring fire to recover from his ordeal. Then one of them said, "Would you like some brose?" while another said, "Or maybe you'd like something better than that?" Donald thought how much he would like a dram, but said nothing. Then the third one went to the press in the corner and took out, not a bottle, but a green mutch cap. She put it on her head and cried, "Off to London!" and disappeared before Donald's very eyes. The other two did the same and Donald was left on his own. So he grabbed the cap, put it on his own head and cried, "Off to London!"

In a trice he found himself in a place such as he had never seen in his life. It seemed to be a garden with shady trees between which were strung bright lanterns. Beneath the trees were set tables with clean white cloths on which were laid silver cutlery, crystal glasses and elegant lace napkins. At the tables were seated ladies and gentlemen dressed in rich clothes. Waiters with laden trays went back and forward serving food and wine. At the table where Donald found himself were seated, not three ugly old hags, but three beautiful young ladies. "If I'm dreaming," said Donald to himself, "I hope it lasts a long time!" The three young ladies were dressed in lovely silk and satin dresses and were wearing costly jewellery. They smiled at Donald and he became aware that he too was dressed like a gentleman in silver buckled shoes and white silk stockings, doeskin knee breeches, an embroidered waistcoat and a stylish jacket. He had lace at his throat and his wrist, a powdered wig on his head, and a three-cornered hat lay on the chair beside him, along with an ivory-topped walking cane. The young ladies told him that they were dining in Ranelagh Gardens, one of the best and most expensive London restaurants. Donald did not ask them how this came about, but just made up his mind to enjoy whatever came his way.

The waiters brought dish after dish, bottle of wine after bottle of wine, and the young ladies seemed very taken with Donald and he certainly was with them. What a night he had! Most of the time he had no idea what he was eating and drinking but it was all delicious and he enjoyed every mouthful. But at last the meal drew to an end and the waiter brought the bill on a silver salver. Oho, that



was a different matter altogether. What they had all eaten and drunk added up to a figure greater than Donald had ever imagined and certainly more than he had ever possessed in his life. He looked in all his pockets for a purse of golden guineas such as a fine gentleman might carry, but there was not a penny to be found. Then Donald *knew* he was in real trouble. In those days, to steal goods worth more than a few pence was a hanging offence, and the amount staring at Donald from the silver salver was much more than that. What was he going to do?

Then one of the young ladies opened a little drawstring bag she carried on her wrist and took out – what else but a green mutch cap! She put it on her head and cried, “Back to Kintail!” and disappeared at once. The other two followed and once again Donald was left on his own. He grabbed the cap and was just about to put it on his own head when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. The manager of the restaurant did not like his customers vanishing without paying their bill, so he had sent for the police of that time, who were called the Bow Street Runners. They tied Donald’s hands behind his back and carried him off to Newgate Gaol. He spent a horrible night there among thieves and murderers, begging someone to untie him so that he could get at the cap, which he had managed to push into his pocket. But no one listened, no one gave him any help. Next morning he was up to the Old Bailey to be tried for his crime and, of course, he had no excuse: he and his friends had run up a huge bill at the restaurant and he had not a penny in his pocket to pay for it. He was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead.

Once sentenced, prisoners were not kept hanging about in those days, as the gaols were too full to allow for this. Sentenced one day, hanged the next was the rule. Donald was taken in a cart with many others to where the gallows stood. Tyburn Tree used to rear its ugly height near the spot where Marble Arch stands today. It was shaped like a double set of football goal posts, with ropes hanging from their crossbars. The condemned man (or woman) had to climb a ladder followed by the hangman who would tie the noose round their neck, after which they were simply pushed off the ladder. Donald had to wait his turn, and he would have waited longer, but at last he had to go forward and make the fatal climb. Behind him came the hangman. Donald felt his last hour had come and prepared himself for the worst. Just before he pushed him off, the hangman whispered in his ear, “Have you any last request?” Donald’s heart beat fast. “Yes,” he said. “I have.” He could hardly believe what was happening. “What is it, then?” asked the hangman. “Go into my right hand pocket,” said Donald, “and you will find an old green cap. Put it on my head and pull it down over my eyes. I don’t want to see where I’m going!” The hangman fumbled in the pocket, found the cap and placed it on Donald’s head. “Back to Kintail!” cried Donald.

Next moment he found himself back on the shores of Loch Duich, with the rope still round his neck and the cross-beam of the gallows still attached. It was just the right bit of wood to mend his boat and any fisherman can use a length of rope!