

The Cailleach of the Snows

A story for the coming of the spring

Cailleach (pronounced 'KAL-yach') is a Gaelic word which means 'grandmother' or 'old woman'. There are all kinds of legends and stories about the Cailleach in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Everyone is in agreement that she is the longest-living being in the land. Bride, or Bridie, is also an ancient goddess; over the years, her stories have been woven into those of the fifty-century Irish saint Brigit, of Kildare, a saint who is said to have visited parts of Britain.

These two great goddesses are brought together in this story because they are associated with the winter and spring months, and many of the legends about them concern the softening of winter's rigour and the coming of the spring. This story draws on Scottish folklore about both of these goddesses. It reminds us all of our intimate connection with the earth, as well as our constant dependency on the return of the spring and the warm months of the year.

Once upon a far time, when there was water where there is now land and land where there is now water, there lived the Cailleach, old and ancient beyond reckoning. She had seen more years than any other being upon earth. For her, the winters were nights and the summers were days. It was she who had formed the mountains when she and her eight sisters first came to Scotland, long before people lived there, flying over the land, throwing stones from their aprons. Where these stones fell to earth, great mountain ranges sprang up.

Many centuries passed and a younger race of people came to live in this land, and the Old Ones withdrew to the high mountains. Whenever the pains of old age came upon the Cailleach and her sisters, they renewed themselves by bathing in the waters of the secret well of youth, to emerge fresh and young again. But the waters rose rarely now and soon there was only enough for one sister to bathe. So the nine sisters drew lots: the lucky one would go into the well and emerge youthful again, while the remaining sisters grew ever older. It was the Cailleach who won. After that, her sisters slowly aged and turned to stone until only she was left.

The Cailleach mourned her sisters. Her tears became snow and her sighing became the winter gales, and the land fell under snow and ice. Age hung upon her; and when she went to the well of youth, there was always less water in it than before. When she emerged, she was less youthful and needed a servant to do her tasks. People were fearful to let their young women go out alone in case the Cailleach might take them. For she grew cunning as the years passed and she disguised herself in the forms of different animals.

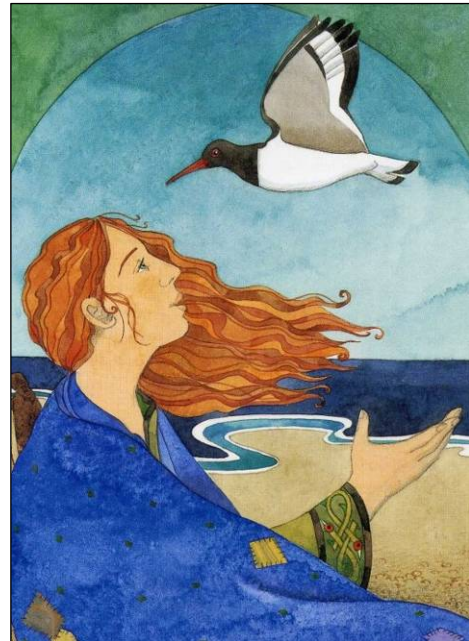
Now, in that region there was a girl called Bride whose mother was the servant of a wise Druid. Whenever Bride went to look after the sheep, the Druid gave her a bone whistle, saying, 'In the high passes, keep this whistle around your neck, for the Cailleach seeks a new servant and can take many shapes: beware if you see a sow or a wolf, an eel or a crane. Blow this whistle if you see such a creature and my protection will be yours.'

One day, Bride went up into the hills with the flock, and a thick icy mist came down so she lost her way. She called out to the old bell-wether that led the flock. Hearing the sound of hooves upon the rocks, she stretched out her hand and touched — not the thick woolly coat of a sheep — but the greasy, leathery skin of a pig. She quickly put the whistle to her mouth, but before she could blow it she was carried off by the Cailleach, who had been lying in wait for her, and the whistle fell invisibly into the icy mists.

The Cailleach took Bride back to her draughty cave and set her to milking the herd of deer that were stockaded in the glen. Many hundreds and thousands of years had passed since reindeer roamed these glens; now there were only the red deer of the mountains. And Bride, who had been used to milking the sheep, now tended the deer and made cheese from their milk instead, and always she dreamed of home.

The months passed, and though Bride searched for the lost whistle, she never could find it. One day, the Cailleach assumed the form of a crane and took Bride down to the seashore to fish with a baited line. 'Fill this creel with fish before nightfall,' commanded the Cailleach. 'I will fish along the loch-side and fetch you back before dark.'

With shivering fingers, Bride baited the line with worms and wept, longing for her mother. As she cried upon the seashore, a black and white bird with a long red beak drew steadily nearer. 'Klee-ee, klee-ee!' it called. 'Klee-ee, klee-ee!' Bride realised it was trying to win her attention so she stopped crying and smiled at the bird. At this, the bird spoke, for it was none other than the Druid, who had come to her in the shape of an oystercatcher. 'Keep fishing, Bride, and listen to me! I have been searching for you for the better part of a year. The time of the Cailleach is passing, and the time of Bride is coming. Do as I say and not only will you be free from the Cailleach's service but you will also inherit her wisdom and power. She cannot survive many more winters without renewal.'



'What must I do?' whispered Bride, taking the fish off the line and placing them in the creel.

'Three things will bring you freedom. First of all you must discover her secret name; then you must look for the well of youth; lastly you must overcome her iron grip upon winter so that the spring may speedily return. To find out her secret name, you must ask her how long she has lived. Listen carefully to all that she tells you and report it to me, for I will come to you again.'

Later that evening, Bride made up the fire and gave the Cailleach a beaker of deer's milk, saying shyly, 'You must have lived a very long time, great Cailleach ...'

'Ah! Child, I have lived from before the time when the seas were once land and the land was once water. Before the mountains raised their peaks, and the glens filled with lochs, the Daughter of the Skies was born,' said the Cailleach.

'Is that your name?' asked Bride, but the Cailleach turned from her sadly and would say no more.

The oystercatcher came to Bride once again and listened to what the Cailleach had said.

'The Cailleach's secret name is Nic Neven, the Daughter of the Skies,' said the Druid. 'Armed with this knowledge, you will be able to find the place of her secret renewal and ensure that she cannot use it. The time is near when she must renew herself or perish. Watch and follow her closely. But now you must gather rushes from the loch and weave them into this shape.' The bird drew in the earth with its beak, making a three-spoked cross. 'You will need this sign to seal the well until the Cailleach goes to her long sleep. The weaker she becomes, the more easily you will overcome her.' The oystercatcher then taught her what to do and what to say.

When the Cailleach dozed in her cave, Bride's busy fingers wove the three-spoked cross from the rushes she had hidden. The very next day, long before dawn, the Cailleach went in the shape of a narrow grey wolf to inspect the well of youth, and Bride followed her at a distance.

But the time for the waters to rise had not yet come and the Cailleach-wolf slunk away down the mountain. Bride went to the well and, just as the Druid had taught her, she laid the cross woven out of rushes upon the opening of the well and said:

'In the name of the ancient one, Nic Neven,
I seal this well with the star of heaven.
By spark of sun and ray of fire,
May the waters of youth rise up no higher,
Until I call with voice of power;
Then waters rise and mountain flower!'

Then Bride said to the oystercatcher, 'I have done all that you told me, but how can her iron grip upon winter be loosened?'

The Druid said, 'Cut a birch wand from the tree that grows at the head of the glen and teach the Cailleach the Jig of the Mill Dust. It is many hundreds of years since she danced and she will be delighted. You must show her all the steps and, putting the birch wand in her hand, tell her that she must practise on you. Make sure you fall down first and let her strike your hands, feet and mouth with the wand. When she does that, then you will be dead for a short time. But never fear, for I will be nearby to whistle the music.

'Be firm and brave, for she will want to dance in turn, and she will breathe upon your hands, feet and mouth so that you become alive again. When it is her turn to fall down, you must strike her with the wand upon her hands, feet and mouth, then she will be become like stone and all her power and wisdom will be yours. But you must be sure never to breathe upon her hands, feet and mouth for, if you do, she will awaken again.'

Bride cut the birch wand and hid it under her cloak. Later that night, she said to the Cailleach, 'The nights are long without dancing and music. I wonder whether you would like to dance, great Cailleach?'

The Cailleach sighed, 'Hoo-a hoo! It is long since I danced with my sisters upon the first grass of the glens. I am too old now and we have no music.'

'I've thought of that. I've taught this bird the tune of a dance — it's the only one he can whistle.'

The oystercatcher obediently whistled the Jig of the Mill Dust with its jaunty rhythm. The Cailleach's foot began to tap and soon she was begging to be taught the dance.

Bride brought out the wand from the woodpile and showed the Cailleach how the dance went. 'First we come together, then we step away, then we weave and change places,' she said, banging the birch wand upon the ground to the rhythm of the steps. Soon the Cailleach was breathless. 'It's a very vigorous dance!' she puffed.

Bride smiled, 'Yes, but we take turns having a rest like this. First one of us taps the other on the head with the wand and the other falls down. Then the one who is still standing will touch the other on the hands, and they do a little dance of their own; then on the feet and lastly on the mouth. And then when the one on the floor is very still, the other one breathes on to their hands, feet and mouth and then they stand up again and change places. Have you got your breath back now? Well, why don't you try holding the wand and I will lie down first while you're learning the dance. Then, you can take your turn lying down and rest as long as you like.'

'Good!' said the Cailleach. And they began. First, she tapped Bride on the head and down she fell to the floor. With the wand, the Cailleach made Bride's hands and feet do a little dance on their own while she lay upon the ground, her heart pounding with fear. She trusted the Druid, but she didn't know that the Cailleach would remember to breathe upon her hands, feet and mouth again. For if she didn't, then Bride would be dead for ever. Then the Cailleach tapped her on the mouth with the wand, and Bride felt the breath dry up within her. The oystercatcher whistled on, but Bride heard no more until the Cailleach began to breathe upon her mouth, and the life came back into her and she leaped up gladly.

'Now it's your turn to dance!' said the Cailleach, and they began again. This time, Bride struck the Cailleach with the wand and she fell to the ground so that the earth itself shuddered. The wand made the Cailleach's hands and feet do a little dance of their own, which made the needles on the pine trees tremble and the icicles hanging from the rocks began to shiver. But these were the last movements that the Cailleach made, for when Bride touched her mouth with the birch wand, the Cailleach turned to cold, unmoving stone.

The oystercatcher bowed his head to Bride, saying, 'The power of the Cailleach is now yours. Use the wand wisely, for, as the light lengthens, so the cold strengthens.'



Bride felt that great power within herself and promised then and there to be the helper of all beings who were in trouble. She called out in a loud voice:

'Nic Neven's power is overthrown!
Rise up waters from deep down stone!
By ray of fire and spark of sun,
May winter's whiteness be undone!
Life be renewed by springtime's power;
Now black ice crack and mountain flower!'

Bride raised the wand and the wheel of rushes that covered the well of youth flew into the sky like a spinning sun. The waters of the well swept up on the power of her song and fell as rain upon the land, melting the ice and snow. Upon the mountainside, the first green shoots of snowdrops pierced the hard ground and everywhere people gave thanks and welcomed Bride back among them.

Every springtime, we still weave Bride's cross out of rushes, to celebrate the turning wheel of the seasons, and to remind us to call upon Bride when we need help. To this day, the oystercatcher is known as Gille Bhrighid, or Bride's Servant.

The winters are not so hard as they once were and the Cailleach rarely moves from her confinement of stone. But, if the snows are heavy, people still say that the Cailleach walks the land once more.

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