

# Bride and Angus

as told by Claire McNicol

**This is the story of Bride.** It's a very ancient Celtic tale which has been pieced together from little fragments.

Long, long ago at the beginning of time, the earth was not as it is now. It was a vast ocean, and on the sea bed lay a huge mill stone. The stone was so enormous that it was only the strength of nine giant women which could make it turn. And one day the nine giant women came together and with their mirth and their might they began to turn the mill. As they did, brown-red clay came forth from the mill and each of the sisters filled her creel, which was fixed upon her back. Then the nine women set off in nine different directions.

One of the sisters, Beira, was a hag who headed to the North, and there became the queen of all the goddesses. As she walked clods of earth began to spill from her creel, making the mountains of Scotland. She swung her mighty hammer, hammering and thumping the earth, creating valleys and glens. And when she had finished her work she gazed around the land that she had made, and she chose the highest mountain to become her home - we know it now as Ben Nevis.

She was the Goddess of Winter and had only one eye, but it was as keen as an eagle's. Her teeth were like little rusty pegs, and her hair was as white as hard frost upon an aspen. She was lonely, grumpy and quick to anger. Her skin was wrinkled and dull dark blue. Every year she tried to stop the oncoming spring by hammering down any green shoots and knocking new buds off the trees with her sharp switch.

Beira had many slaves, and one winter she took a new and beautiful maiden called Bride as a slave. She imprisoned Bride in the bowels of Ben Nevis. She was always scolding Bride, finding fault with her and making her do the most

menial and difficult tasks. One day she gave Bride a brown-coloured fleece and she said to her, 'You must wash this in the cold running stream until it is white, and don't you dare come back until it is gleaming white.' Bride took the fleece and washed it in the waterfall which cascaded down from the mountain, but try as she might the fleece would not come clean.

Day after day she laboured, until one day an old grey bearded man came upon her and found her weeping. 'Why are you weeping my child?' 'Queen Beira has commanded me to make this fleece white, but it cannot be done. Who are you?' she asked. 'My name is Father Winter, give me the fleece and I will make it white for you.' Father Winter took the fleece and he shook it once, twice, three times; when he handed it back to her it was gleaming and as white as snow. Then he gave Bride a little bunch of snowdrops and he said, 'Show these to your mistress and tell her that the green shoots have sprouted beneath the white snow.'

Bride returned to the mountain castle of Beira and laid the clean fleece at Beira's feet. But the old queen scarcely looked at it for her eyes were fixed upon the snowdrops. 'Where did you find these flowers?' she asked angrily. Bride told Beira about the old man in the forest. 'Evil are the tidings you bring me girl, be gone from my sight!' Bride felt a little fluttering of hope in her heart; perhaps at last Queen Beira's rule might come to an end. Beira jumped on her grey steed and rode off to the North, the South, the East and the West, hammering the earth and trying to keep the spring at bay.

Meanwhile on the green isle of summer, which drifted on the silver-blue tides of the Atlantic off the West Coast of Scotland, Angus Og, God of Summer, dreamt of a beautiful maiden who was weeping. When he awoke he told his father about his dream. His father said, 'The fair princess whom you have dreamt of is Bride. And in the days when you are King of Summer she will be your queen. She is weeping because she is kept prisoner by the Queen of Winter.' 'I must go forth at once to search for her,' said Angus Og. The King said, 'Now is the wolf month and uncertain is the temper of the wolf. Wait

here until the green grass begins to grow and the seas are calm.' 'I cannot wait,' said Angus, 'I must go now.'

And so he rode to the ocean, and there he waved his wand, once, twice, three times over the ocean. And he borrowed three days from the month of August, giving them to the month of February. At once the sea was calm and the sun shone through the grey clouds. Angus mounted his white steed and rode in his royal crimson robe across the sea. That night Bride saw him in a dream and knew that he longed to set her free. When she awoke she was shedding tears of joy, and where her tears fell little violets as blue as her eyes sprung up. Angus rode across the snow-covered lands of Scotland, and when at last he came to Ben Nevis and freed Bride from the fortress, she stepped outside, and as she walked upon the snow it melted, and little spring flowers sprung up.

The Queen of the Fairies came out of the forest and led Angus and Bride into the Forest. Angus and Bride were greeted by the Fairy Queen, who waved her wand and transformed Bride's clothing from rags to a white and silver robe. The linty was the first bird in the forest to hail Bride, and the Fairy Queen proclaimed from now on the linty will be known as the bird of Bride. Down on the seashore the oyster catcher shrieked with joy and the Fairy Queen named the oyster catcher the page of Bride. In Bride's right hand she carried a white wand entwined with golden corn stalks, and in her left hand a golden horn of plenty.

So the Fairy Queen wed Angus and Bride and as they walked forth from their wedding they came to a river which was covered in ice. Bride dipped her fingers in the river and the ice melted away as the Hag of Ice shrieked and fled.

Beira could hear the singing of the birds, and she set off at once to wage war against Angus and Bride. She rode on her grey steed, kicking up dark grey clouds at her heels. But Angus and Bride had already left the land of

Scotland for the Green Isle of Summer where they were proclaimed King and Queen of Summer.

The battle between Beira and Angus waged on for many days and many weeks, but finally Beira was so weary that she threw her hammer underneath the holly bush and she got in a little boat and road out to the Isle of Summer. There she sipped from the well of youth and fell fast asleep.

The story of Bride explains the changing seasons in Scotland. Bride is the Goddess of Spring and Beira is the Goddess of Winter. Some folks say that Beira was once herself very young and beautiful but she has become old and haggard. And some folks say that at the very end of the winter she drinks from the well of eternal youth and she becomes young and beautiful. But as the autumn progresses she ages and becomes a hag once more, and then she takes up her throne and reigns supreme as the Goddess of Winter.

The story brings comfort though, because if you are in the depths of winter and Beira is ruling, and the snow is falling, and the winds are howling, you can always remember that it won't be long before the wedding of Bride and Angus and the coming of a new spring.

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