



CAMP 2017 STORY »»»» Brigid and the Cailleach of the Snows

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 her nights and the summers were her days. It was the Cailleach who had formed the mountains when she and her sisters first came to the land of Scotland, long before people lived there. They flew over the land, throwing stones from their aprons and where these stones fell to earth, great mountain ranges sprang up.

Many centuries passed and the Cailleach and her sisters grew tired and weary. A new people came and lived on their land, and the Old Ones withdrew to the high mountains where they could not be disturbed by the doings of human beings. Now, the reason why the Cailleach and her sisters had survived for so many years was the secret Well of Renewal, high up in the mountains. Whenever the pains of age came upon them, they would bathe in those clear, cold waters and emerge fresh and young again. But since the coming of people, the waters of the Well of Renewal would only rise at certain times. Soon it became clear that there would only be enough water for one of the sisters to bathe in.

The sisters said, "Let us draw lots between us and see which of us will bathe when the waters rise again." The lucky sister would go into the well and emerge youthful again, while the remaining sisters would grow ever weaker. They did not die as humans die, but would sit still, looking out over the lochs and pastures of the lowlands until each one turned to stone. One by one, each of the sisters became a part of the mountain ranges that they had helped to form, returning to stone, until only the Cailleach was left.

The Cailleach mourned her sisters, crying, "Hoo-a-hoo! Where are my sisters now?" Her tears became snow and her sighing became the winter gales, and the land fell under snow and ice.

After that sad time, the years hung heavy upon her. Hers was a lonely life. While her sisters were alive, they would hunt for and prepare food; they would do the washing, make clothes

and sing strange and haunting songs together when darkness fell. Now they were gone, and the Cailleach became as grim as an icy morning when the sun never rises out of the clouds.

She managed her life as best as she could. She clothed herself with the veils of the weather: cloaks of starry nights and of clear blue days, robes of gray, knitted clouds, and a white mantle of fresh snow.

When her bones ached and her strength began to fail, she would bathe in the magical well, which renewed her, but the waters did not have the power that they once had, and they rose too seldom to restore her to full energy. At the rare times of their rising, she would have to ensure that she was the first to reach the waters, before a bird drank there, or before a dog barked.

Her life became perpetual winter. As the years turned, she would shun the warmer months of summer and hide within the sunless valleys of the high mountains. But when it was time for winter to return, she would call in the winter with three strokes of her blackthorn staff. With her stone hammer, she would strike the ground until it grew hard with frost. And she would blanket the earth with her white mantle of snow. At the approach of spring time the Cailleach would retreat to her mountain home until it was time again for winter.

Years passed like days, days like seconds. When she went to the Well of Renewal, there was always less water in it than there had been before. When she bathed in the waters, she emerged less youthful, less agile. The tasks she had once performed easily now grew harder. She needed a servant to tend to her needs: a maiden to fish the lochs, to weave her clothes, to prepare her food and comb her hair. From all over Scotland, she took young maidens to be her servants. But the Cailleach lived so long that, one by one, the maidens she chose grew old and died.

Winter was the time of the Cailleach's strength and she was still able to go about in the form of different animals, as a monstrous sow, as a narrow gray wolf, as a slippery eel, or as a querulous crane.



Now, a girl by the name of Brighid lived in the house of a druid with her mother. Brighid would look after the sheep, following them over the hills. One day Brighid went up into the hills with the flock, and a thick, icy mist came down so that she lost her way. She called out to the old bellwether sheep that led the flock. Hearing the sound of hoofs on 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 was snatched up and carried off by the Cailleach.

The Cailleach bore Brighid back to her drafty cave and set her to milking the herd of deer that were penned in the glen.

The seasons passed, yet it remained winter. The people and the animals and plants of the earth suffered. Brighid knew that something had to be done to restore balance. Though the Cailleach is a mighty force, beyond what most could ever hope to overcome, Brighid knew a magical secret: Love. She called Love to her with a song. Every night in the depths of winter, with deep love, she called. And always she dreamed of home.



One day, the Cailleach took the form of a crane and took Brighid down to the seashore to fish with a baited line. “Fill this creel with fish before nightfall,” commanded the Cailleach. “I shall feed along the loch side and fetch you back before dusk.”

With shivering fingers, Brighid baited the line with worms and wept, longing for her mother. As she cried, she called her mother’s love to her with her song. And as she did, a black and white bird with a long red beak drew steadily nearer, calling “Klee-ee, klee-ee!” It was the druid who came to her in the shape of an oystercatcher. “Keep fishing, Brighid, 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 Brighid is coming. Take my advice 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 Brighid, taking the fish off the line into the creel.

“Three things will bring you freedom. First of all, you must discover her secret name, then you must discover the Well of Renewal, lastly you must overcome her iron grip upon winter so that the spring may speedily return. To find out her 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, Brighid 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 Bones was born,” said the Cailleach sadly and would say no more.

The oystercatcher came to Brighid again and listened to what the Cailleach had said. “The Cailleach’s secret name is ‘Nic Neven,’ the Daughter of the Bones,” said the transformed 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. Watch and follow her closely. But now you must gather rushes from the loch and weave them into a threefold starry wheel, You will need this starry wheel to seal the well until the Cailleach goes to her long sleep,” and the bird taught her what to do.

When the Cailleach dozed in her cave, Brighid’s busy fingers wove the starry wheel from the rushes she had hidden. The very next day, long before dawn, the Cailleach went in the shape of a narrow gray wolf to inspect the well, and Brighid 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. Brighid went to the well and, just as the druid had taught her, she laid the starry wheel 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!”



The oystercatcher came to Brighid again the following day.

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

The druid-bird said, “Cut a birch wand from the tree that grows at the head of the glen and teach the Cailleach the Dance of the Mill Dust. You must show her all the steps and movements and, putting the birch wand in her hand, tell her that she must first practice upon you. Make sure that 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 time to fall down, you must strike her with the wand upon her hands, feet, and mouth, and then she will 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.”

Brighid cut the birch wand and hid it under her cloak. Later that night, she went to the Cailleach, saying, “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.”

Brighid smiled at her. “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 Dance 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.

Brighid 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 explained, banging the birch wand upon the ground to the rhythm of the steps. Soon the Cailleach was breathless. “It’s a very vigorous dance!”

Brighid 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 the feet and lastly the mouth. And when the one on the floor is very still, the other one breathes onto their hands, feet, and mouth and 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 Brighid on the head and down she fell to the floor. As Brighid lay on the ground, her heart pounded with fear. She

trusted the druid, but she didn’t know whether the Cailleach would remember to breathe upon her hands, feet, and mouth again. For if she didn’t, then Brighid would be dead forever. Then the Cailleach tapped her on the mouth with the wand, and Brighid felt the breath dry up within her. The oystercatcher whistled on, but Brighid 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, Brighid struck the Cailleach with the wand and she fell to the ground so that the earth itself shuddered. When Brighid touched her mouth with the birch wand, the Cailleach turned to cold, unmoving stone.

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



Brighid 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!”

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

The winters are not so hard as they once were, and the Cailleach rarely moves from her confinement of stone. But, if the snows sweep down from the high mountains and cloak the land with white, people still say the Cailleach of the Snows walks the land once more.

