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The Eve Of Saint Agnes

A silly superstition, or a magical confirmation of hopes? The ritual I longed to ignore had power to change both our lives

By Elizabeth Loupas

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Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh

The Eve of Saint Agnes was for simple-hearted girls. I had believed the saint's promises once – if I spoke the rhymes, cast the living grains into the frozen fields, slept with my eyes to heaven, in my dreams I would see the face of my true love.

But after – what was it, seven years? Ten? Fifteen, even? After performing the ritual every year, I had never seen him. I had never met him. I would be twenty-eight years old in the summer, and it was hard, so hard, not to be bitter when I saw the young girls in the queen's household, the seventeen-year-olds and twenty-year-olds, marrying their handsome boys and bearing their rosy, beautiful babies.

So hard.

"Mistress Caitriona," the girl pleaded. She was chestnut-haired, brown-eyed, fifteen or so, pretty and charming and used to getting her way. She was Isobel Forbes, a fine lord's daughter.

"Everyone says you know the rites for Saint Agnes' Eve better than anyone else. Please teach me."

"I am occupied." I was making a batch of fine soap for the queen, scented with lilies and heather for France and Scotland. "Should you not be occupied as well, Lady Isobel, serving the queen?"

"She is off to Glasgow, to fetch the king back to Edinburgh. Everyone says he has the pox. If it were me I would leave him in Glasgow and be done with him."

I continued to stir my soap.

"There are secrets and conspiracies everywhere," I said. "Even I have heard the whispers. I suspect she simply wants him here where she can keep watch over him. Turn that sand glass over, please."

She turned the glass.

"I do not care about the queen's secrets," she said. "I want to perform the rites of Saint Agnes' Eve, and dream of my true love, but I do not know how."

"I suspect you know your true love, and only want the dream to confirm it."

She coloured up, pink as a wild rose.

"I know him. We have danced together

the Earl of Argyll to be sure, but on the wrong side of the blanket – no doting father or carefully arranged marriage for me. A lady of the queen's household, yes, but a barely-recognised perfumer in the stillrooms and not a lady of honour to dance in beautiful dresses by torchlight.

"I do not have time for Saint Agnes' Eve." Speaking through fifteen years of swallowed-back tears, I was perhaps more brusque than I intended. "And in any case, I do not believe –"

Her face fell with such childlike disappointment that I stopped mid-sentence. I found I could no more refuse her than I could refuse milk to a kitten.

"I do not believe you truly wish to do it," I amended. "You must go to bed fasting, after all, and lie naked on your back with your hands behind your head and one white linen sheet to cover you, however cold you may be. You must be silent and look neither left nor right nor behind you. How can you do that in your room with all the other maids?"

"I wish to do it," she said stoutly.

"There is a room below the royal

She was so young, so pretty and so lucky – I wanted to hate her

and he wrote me the most beautiful poem, and my father and his father are friends – I am sure they will agree to the match. But I want to dream of him."

I stirred my soap and watched the sand slipping down through the glass. I wanted to hate her – she was so young, so pretty, so lucky. Why did life lavish all its gifts into some girls' hands? Birth, youth, beauty, a handsome young lord to write her love poems. Then there was me, Caitriona Campbell – a relation of

bedchamber, and it is empty with the queen off to Glasgow. I will sleep there."

I smiled at her determination.

"Very well," I said. "Do not eat again today and come here to the stillroom after Compline. I will show you what to do."

And thus by changing what I had intended to say, I changed everything.

She slipped into the stillroom wrapped in a blue velvet cloak lined and faced with silver fur. Her face was flushed with

I found I could not refuse her childlike eagerness



Why did life lavish all its gifts into some girl's hands?

anticipation and her eyes were bright.

"Mistress Caitriona! I am ready. What must we do first?"

I donned my brown wool mantle.

"We need grains. Whole, living grains, nothing cooked or ground or dried."

"But where –?"

"The stables, of course. Oats."

She clapped her hands – yes, she really did – and off we went. The stables of Holyrood, across the palace yard, were half-deserted; I had been there before and knew just where to find the bags with the living grain.

Isobel watched wide-eyed as I untied the strings and plunged my hands into the cold, slippery oats.

"Take a handful," I said. "You must

take it yourself – no one should touch the grains but you."

She complied. I had started to close the bag when she said, "Are you not going to take grains for yourself?"

"I am a bit past the age of mooning over the face of my true love."

"How can you show me if you do not do the ritual yourself? You fasted."

"I was too busy with my soap to stop for supper."

True, as far as it went. But also – she was right. As much as it pained me, she had infected me with her youth and hope.

I took a handful of the grains and closed the bag. We made our way back across the palace yard and into the garden. It was icy cold, and the ground

was frozen solid; there were stinging flakes of snow on the winter wind.

"I w-w-wonder," Isobel said, hugging her cloak around her, "why Saint Agnes had to get herself martyred in January."

"I do not think she had much choice in the matter. Here, this will do." We stopped. "Say the words after me. And when I cast my grains, you do the same."

She nodded. Her pretty little teeth were chattering. I lifted my face to the wind and let the snowflakes melt on my cheeks. They felt like tears.

"*Agnes sweet and Agnes fair.*"

Dried leaves rustled as they blew by with the snow.

"*Hither, hither now repair.*"

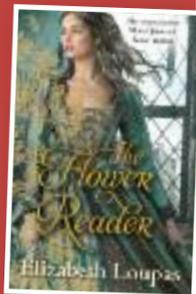
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I waited. Isobel repeated my words.

I was crying. I hated it that this child, this golden, fortunate child, could see my anguish and loneliness, could see me begging Saint Agnes for my true love this one last time.

*“Bonny Agnes, let me see,
The lad who is to marry me.”*

I swept my hand out, cast the grains into the wind. They blew away with the snowflakes, white as lambs.

Isobel’s voice was high and strong and unlike mine, filled with joy. She cried out the words as if she were singing and threw the oat-grains with passionate delight.

I put my finger to my lips. Neither of us could speak again until morning, or look to the left or right or backward.

We slipped into the palace again like ghosts, our cloaks spangled with snow, and I went with her to the room she had chosen. We had no light but a sliver of waning moon. A white linen sheet lay folded on the bed, prepared. I helped her undress and stretch herself out naked in the cold, showed her how to fold her hands behind her head and look straight up to heaven. She was beautiful as an angel. I spread the sheet over her, tender as a mother, and went away, never looking back.

I dreamed...

The man was standing in front of a tall arched casement. It was morning, bright morning, and with the light streaming in behind him I could not see his face clearly. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with rough-cut hair and

I had seen this man every year – but every year I had forgotten

sunburned skin, dressed in a huntsman’s leather jacket and breeches, not a courtier’s silks. There was a plaid over his shoulder, green and black.

He looked at me... oh, he looked at me, and I knew... my heart almost burst from my breast with the ecstasy and the agony of the knowledge. I had seen him before. I had seen him every year – but every year I had forgotten.

In my dream I said, “Who are you?”

He looked at me, and as if from nowhere his eyes shone with a blue light. In a deep, clear voice he answered, “Who are you?”

When morning came I rose, washed myself and dressed, just as I always did in my tiny alcove behind the stillroom. My body felt cold and empty. Again, Saint Agnes had sent me nothing.

I wondered if Isobel had dreamed and if so, what her dreams had been.

I said my prayers, and broke my fast with a bowl of porridge – cooked grains, not living grains flying on the



There was no light but the waning moon

winter wind. I checked the blocks of lily-and-heather soap curing in my moulds. Their scent was sweet and true. The queen would be pleased.

I knew I should put on my apron and begin work on another batch. Instead, I walked through the palace to the room

under the queen’s bedchamber.

In the morning light I could see the colours of the hangings and bedcurtains, the height of the casement window with its alternating clear and coloured panes. Isobel was standing speaking earnestly to a man who stood in front of the casement, the light behind him. He was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in well-worn leather with a green-and-black plaid over his shoulder. Did I know him? He seemed familiar.

Isobel turned. Something in her face was wrong. She looked – bereft. Older.

“Mistress Caitriona,” she said. Her

voice was emotionless. “Good morning to you. May I present my kinsman, Iain Bannerman? He has come with letters from my brother, bidding me return home to be married.”

I could not stop staring at Iain Bannerman. He bowed slightly. When he lifted his head, a streak of blue light from the window’s coloured glass fell across his eyes.

“Saint Agnes has granted your wish, then,” I answered. “You will marry –”

“I am to marry the Earl Marischal’s second son. He is old enough, my brother says, to take me in hand.”

I was shocked speechless. Not the lord’s son, then – the handsome boy who wrote her poems and danced with her.

“I am sorry, Mistress Caitriona,” she went on in the same small, cold voice. “I must pack – we will be off within the hour. Please give the queen my personal apologies – my brother has written to her at more length. Iain, you may see to the horses.”

“Aye, lady,” he said. His voice was deep and clear. “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mistress Caitriona. I will be back in Edinburgh next week to see to the rest of Lady

Isobel’s personal effects. May I call upon you to help me?”

I had the strangest feeling. The strangest, strangest feeling.

“Yes,” I answered. “Of course.”

He looked at me through the patch of blue morning’s light and then turned and walked out of the room.

“Isobel,” I said, when he was gone. I could not help myself. “My dear, did you dream last night?”

She turned away from me and began to fold the white linen sheet she had slept under, naked and beautiful and young. I saw faint streaks on her face that might once have been tears.

“No,” she said. “I did not dream at all.”

The author says . . .

“John Keats’ *The Eve of St Agnes* is one of my favourite poems. I added a twist of Scots folklore, a touch of Mary Stuart, and the story just leaped onto the page...”