

This was an idea that went into Glade Hall, a book about a haunted mansion.

Poor Agnes, she did so badly want a child.....

Warning; Horror elements some might find disturbing

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About 1,600 Words

It was a terrible night and Agnes was trying to hurry without running. The soldiers still in the area might spot a lamp, so she was relying on the full moon to find her way. The bundle under her shawl was already wet and she didn't want the child to be completely drenched. It moved, a boy child she thought, though there hadn't been time to make sure. Mary had given her instructions, but her memory wasn't perfect, she just hoped that the sex of the child wasn't important.

"It has to be alive." Mary had told her. "Offer dead blood and they'll punish you."

Mary had told her a lot about punishments and how dangerous The Glade could be, but she had her child, it had worked for her. Her precious Thomas, who was now six and was already watching his father as he worked the local wood into furniture and floor boards. No, not father, though they treated him as theirs.

"He'll never be the brightest." Mary had told her. "But he's ours and we love him."

Agnes had often watched Thomas as he walked and talked and fitted perfectly into the village. There was a faraway look in his eyes every so often, but nothing that had ever scared the priest. The child attended church and there had never been any incidents, no signs of celestial fire come to destroy him.

"I carried him for a full nine months." Mary had told her. "The birth itself was agony, but I've been told that's normal."

Mary had been forty three and Agnes was only forty, perhaps a younger body would feel less pain ? Agnes had a good husband, who'd never treated her even slightly differently when she'd failed to produce any children.

"Plenty of time my dear." He'd often said. "These things are all God's will."

They were farmers though and every year the work seemed to be harder. Agnes had married at fifteen, her parents had agreed the match with a family in the next village. Nearly twenty years she'd been in her marital bed and her husband had been a vigorous and attentive lover. If God intended her to have children, he was leaving it a little late.

"A son to help with the harvest." Mary had told her. "You can ask for a son, or a daughter."

They should have had two sons by now and a daughter to help in the house. Unless something was done, they faced destitution once they were too old to work the land.

So Agnes was on her way to The Glade, with a baby wrapped in a dirty shawl, a boy child. The travellers had so many children, dozens of them, almost an infestation of dirty brats. They probably wouldn't even miss one. She just had to get to her destination without running into any soldiers. Cromwell's men were still chasing Royalists out of the area.

"You might die Agnes, many have." Mary had told her. "The spirits of The Glade can be fickle and they may take against you for no particular reason. Remember Nell !"

Nell had gone to ask for nothing more than the love of a boy she wanted to notice her. She'd made the offering and no one had ever found fault with her observance of the correct ways. Nell had

returned home screaming, the left side of her face rotting off the bone. She still lived, but never left the house again.

"Keep still child." She muttered. "I don't want to drop you."

The child was still alive and well, she could feel it kicking around inside the shawl. The boy child had looked to be less than a year old, Mary had told her the younger the better. Fancy his parents leaving him outside on a rainy night, they only had themselves to blame. Agnes had considered keeping the gypsy child, but she wanted a child that looked like her, the way Thomas looked like Mary. Besides, people asked questions about children who arrived readymade and one year old.

"Here, we're here." She mumbled.

Another few yards of sodden, clinging grass and she was on the oval, between the standing stones. No going back now, the spirits didn't take kindly to being teased. She looked up at the yews, seeming to form a cage over the entire glade. There were shadows too, the spirits, according to local folklore. None of it worried Agnes, just so long as she gained a child from the horror she was about to commit. She walked towards the largest of the standing stones and knelt as close to it as she dared, close enough to just about reach it with outstretched arms. There was a sound behind her and she turned, seeing two or three shadows beside the smaller stone.

"I come to offer a sacrifice."

They must have heard her, she felt safe to continue. She laid the sodden shawl on the ground, ignoring the infant inside it, for now. Agnes had borrowed a knife from Mary, the same one she'd used the night Thomas was conceived. It was long and sharp and Agnes ran it over the palm of her own left hand, feeling the blood begin to flow.

"I come to sacrifice." She said. "I seek a child of my own, a boy child."

"The words aren't that important." Mary had told her. "The spirits will see into your heart and know why you're there."

Agnes rubbed her bloody palm over the front of the stone, feeling it warm up. She moved back and there was a slight orange glow where her hand had been, which quickly vanished. Was that right? The problem was that there was no bible for such things, no holy man to see. It was all in the memories of the local villagers, mainly the women. It only took one wrong instruction and Agnes knew she might die, or end up like poor Nell. Perhaps Nell had done everything right and she'd been given the wrong telling of the lore? Agnes remembered seeing Nell without a scarf around her face once, she'd been able to see her teeth through the hole in her face.

Agnes trembled as she unwrapped the child from the sodden shawl. It wasn't moving, a corner of the shawl had become wrapped round its neck. It couldn't be dead, not after all she'd been through. She'd started the offering, promised a sacrifice, the damn thing had to be alive.

"Wake up you brat!"

She prodded the child's leg with the knife and it moved, she was certain of it. Its body was warm, but there hadn't been long enough for it to cool down, if it was dead. Perhaps hot blood would do as well? Agnes put her cheek against the child's and waited to hear any sign of life. The wind had picked up and the rain was drumming against the yew leaves.

"Damn, damn, damn!"

She calmed herself and carried on, there was no other choice. A little blood was needed first, so she cut the boy's arm, just above the wrist. Good, the blood was hot and still flowed freely. Agnes made sure her palm was well painted with the blood and then held it against the standing stone.

"Feel the life of the one I offer, drink his blood."

Again the stone felt hot and this time the orange glow carried on for several seconds. It had to be a good sign, the child had to still be alive. Now for the part Agnes had been dreading, but stress and agitation made it easier. She held the tiny body steady and pushed the knife up under his ribs and into the heart. Lots of blood now, the dark crimson of deep arterial blood. Agnes had helped her husband to butcher their livestock, so a pool of crimson on a child's belly didn't bother her. She dropped the blade and used both hands, getting as much of the blood onto the standing stone as she could. The dead boy was unimportant now, she pushed his body away, so that she could get closer, almost caressing the stone.

"I made my sacrifice, please grant me a child."

Still one task to do and one final use for the knife. Any of the trees near the smaller stone would do.

"They all need feeding." Mary had told her.

Just a shallow grave, barely a few inches under the leaf mould, but that was deep enough. No one dug around in The Glade, everyone knew what they were likely to find. Agnes put the knife away and hoped it had worked, though it might be a few weeks until she knew if she carried a child.

The pain in her feet was the first sign that the offering hadn't gone to according to the rules. Agnes fell backwards onto the ground, as the blackened flesh fell off her feet and ankles. The boy, the damn child must have been dead, she'd done everything right.

"Please !" She shouted. "I beg you ! Don't make me a cripple."

The necrosis moved fast, eating the flesh off her thighs. Agnes was unconscious by then, but she didn't need to worry about being left a cripple. She died long before her heart and lungs were turned to decaying, foetid tissue. It rained hard all night and by morning, the body that had once been Agnes, was just a few pieces of bone.

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~ The End ~

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