

Winner EWC Historical Short Story Prize

a Bonny Lass



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First Published in Scotland in 2022 by Nydie Books

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Cover Design; Mike Masters

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A Bonny Lass

Agnes touches the fur with the tip of her finger. Kitten pelt makes the softest of cuffs for a fine lady's gloves.

'Get awa, from there. What do ye think ye're daen, touching ma goods with yer mucky paws,' shouts the shopkeeper, his spittle a glistening spray in the sunlight.

She tosses her head. 'My mistress sent me.'

'Aye, get oot of here.' He waves his stick, but without much conviction.

She weaves her way through the stalls, lifting her skirts as she draws close to the cattle pens. The ground is running with warm blood from a slaughtered beast, the smell of it thick in the air. The buyer blocks her path, standing arms folded, watching the flesher's every move to make certain there's no trickery and he gets all the parts of the animal he's paid for. She edges past him, bony elbows protruding. A hand reaches to pinch her breast and she rakes her nails down it – this is one body part he didn't pay for.

'Wee besom,' he mutters, rubbing the hand, eyes still fixed on the butchering.

Agnes picks up her skirts and runs. The baby within her nudges, mirroring her disquiet. She stops and presses her belly, feeling the strangeness of this soft swelling, and knowing she can't hide it for much longer.

At the end of Mercatgait she emerges in the broad space before the cathedral, built to venerate the bones of Saint Andrew from whom the town takes its name. The cathedral's spires rise high above: twin watchers in the sky. Head bent, she crosses the forecourt and slips down the path at the side of the wall which encircles its grounds, stumbling over sharp stones as she descends to the harbour. She stands on the pier, the wood comforting beneath unshod feet. The fishwives are helping to unload the day's catch, swinging the heavy baskets onto their shoulders with ease. The sun sparkles on a sea as blue as the blessed Virgin's gown, but the wind whips across the water blowing her skirt tight around her legs. She shields her eyes, searching. There are ships swinging at anchor in the bay, but the last of the small fishing boats is rowing steadily for harbour.

'He's no coming back, lassie,' calls a wifey with two small weans skittering around her feet.

Agnes hunches and slinks away. Reaching the end of the quay she glances back over her shoulder, chewing on her lower lip until she tastes blood. She bites harder, but the hurt can't dull the longing for her fisher-lad.

'What are ye doing here, Agnes? Come away home.'

A glimmer of a smile creeps across her face as she looks up at the young master. 'Ye better watch. If ye grow any mair, yer heid will be hitting the sky.'

'And if your nose, and words, get any sharper, you can dispense with a knife altogether.' Thomas nudges her and, after a moment, she chooses to giggle rather than clout him.

They stroll through the Harbourgait and up the pends towards Southgait. The

bells ring out the hour and Agnes walks faster; she should've already returned. Thomas goes in through the front while she scurries down the vennel to the back. Auld Beattie is herding the geese into their pen. It's Agnes's job but she's scared of them, and they sense it, running at her with wings flapping wide and long necks outstretched to bite the hand that feeds them.

'I'll wring your necks one dark night,' she tells them often, but they are untroubled.

'Tak care, the Mistress is stalking ye,' hisses Auld Beattie, as Agnes rushes for the kitchen. She hangs her shawl on its peg and reaches for the butter churn.

'Come into the workroom,' says a voice so cold it would freeze God's blood.

She jumps. 'Oh, mistress, I didna see ye there.'

The mistress opens the door wide and goes into the passageway, dark with wood panelling. She lets it bang shut behind her, but Agnes understands she's meant to follow.

The old master sits in his high-backed chair, tugging on his ear. He'll support her, surely.

The mistress narrows her eyes, and pinches her lips together. She looks like a hawk readying to dive on a field mouse – at least her face does. Her body is plump as an overstuffed mattress but there's no comfort for the master, nor anyone else, to be found there.

'Tell her.'

The master's ear is going to come off if he keeps tugging on it like that. Agnes shifts from one foot to the other. The mistress is still as stone, hands crossed over her apron. The master clears his throat. Agnes can hear the floor boards creaking above her head. She prays it's the young master on his way downstairs to defend her, but it's Auld Beattie whose head appears around the door.

'Go about your business.'

Auld Beattie withdraws her wrinkled face. Agnes can hear voices in the hallway but the master is speaking and she forgets them.

'Ach lassie, the mistress tells me things are no so good with ye.'

'There naething wrong wi' me.' She straightens up and glowers at them both.

'Nothing wrong with you.' The mistress leans over and pokes Agnes in the belly. Instinctively Agnes knocks her hand away and the mistress slaps Agnes, the sound loud in the chamber.

'There's a swelling in there which cannot entirely be explained by all the food you freely consume within this house.'

Agnes covers her belly with her hands and looks to the master, eyes brimming.

The door bursts open and Thomas rushes in. 'What's going on?'

Agnes waits, eyes on her master, but he's gazing at the floor and still tugging on his ear.

The mistress glares at Thomas. 'Agnes must leave us.'

Agnes cannot stop the shaking. They ripple through her body like churning milk.

The master's mouth is working, as though he's chewing on his words, but nothing comes out.

Thomas's eyes grow wide. 'You canna throw her out on the street.'

'She knew well enough what would happen.'

Thomas turns his back on his mother and, raising his eyebrows, leans towards his father. 'Are ye no going to speak for her, Father?'

The master wrinkles his nose, the shake of his head slight, yet its message clear.

A thin wail fills the room. Agnes realises the noise is coming from her. She drops to her knees, rocking and keening.

'Shame on you.' Thomas slams out the room.

The air from his passing seems to free the master, who rises from his chair, sidles past Agnes, and follows him. The mistress opens the door and shouts for Auld Beattie. Agnes's few belongings are brought and she's led out past the geese, who for once do not hiss.

Auld Beattie presses a few coins into Agnes's hand, 'I'm sorry lass, 'tis all I have,' and leaves her in the street.

Agnes hears shouting from inside the house, but no one comes. Head hanging, she clutches her small bundle tight to her chest and creeps away.

* * *

Agnes loosens her bodice, tucks the baby inside, then wraps her shawl around them both. He's against bare skin, perhaps that will warm him. But how can it when she's chattering with the cold, and there will be no fire lit until evening. She crawls into the box bed with her brother's children, and they coorie together.

Geordie's wife is blown in the door, the rain chasing after her. Agnes can see the basket is light on Effie's arm. She knows Effie wants her gone but, unlike the mistress, Effie doesn't shout about it. Instead she sighs and speaks of how little food there is, especially now it's late winter: the boats barely able to go out for the gales; only some kale left in the ground; too many mouths to feed.

Agnes curls over her bairn, avoiding Effie's eye. She tries to nurse him, but his weak cry tells that she has no milk. She passes him to her eldest niece and goes to the privy. There she extracts the few coins gifted by Auld Beattie from their hiding place in the hem of her skirt. When Effie takes the leather bucket and goes to fetch water, she takes the baby and creeps out.

The wet-nurse holds him in her arms and shakes her head. He lies limp and does not latch on, even when the nurse forces her milk-dripping nipple between his lips. She hands him back to Agnes, and the coins too. 'The bairn's too weak. Let him go, lass.'

But he's her child and she cannot give him up. She makes her way to the apothecary but he too looks at the bairn and shakes his head. She insists, desperation making her bold before her betters. He shrugs, takes all Auld Beattie's coins and hands over a potion.

Agnes sits in the corner, holding her boy tight against her beating heart. She bends her face close to rub against his cheek. His skin is softer than the softest kitten fur. She weeps and weeps as he slips away.

A kindly neighbour provides the small length of cloth needed for a shroud. Her

brother digs the grave on a hillside overlooking a stormy grey sea. There's no money to pay for a prayer from the priest, even if he would give one for a child born in sin. Agnes kneels, the wind blustering around her rich with the salt smell of the sea. She speaks to Jesus, pleading with him to look kindly upon her lost bairn.

Apart from one touch on the shoulder, Effie leaves Agnes to her grief. But her weans, one a year for seven years – and all living – gather close. Nothing is said, yet Agnes accepts she can stay no longer. She collects her small bundle, and doesn't wait for Geordie to return from the alehouse.

'I'm sorry,' mumbles Effie, come to watch her stumble down the outside stairs.

At the bottom Agnes lifts her desolate face to look up at Effie, and nods. She doesn't blame her. If Agnes had seven children to feed and a man who drank as much as he worked, then she'd want rid of an extra mouth too. And what does it matter what happens to her, it's best if Effie's weans can have what little food she eats.

She wanders the streets, knowing that she must make her way down to the harbour where the whorehouse sits behind the sailor's hostel. No respectable woman will take her as a servant, she ruined her one chance – or more like it was ruined for her. She thinks of her laddie lost at sea. What a daft pair of bairns they were. Something twists inside, like she's being wrung tight, and she cannot breathe. First her bonny man and now her baby.

She finds herself outside the house in Southgait, hasn't been here since she was thrown out last year. She heard tell that the mistress died and hoped that the master might come looking for her – but he did not. And the young master is married, 'tis said the bride is from grand stock. Agnes joined the crowds, well-hid, to watch the wedding procession go by. Thomas, beard grown long and red, was grinning at the lewd comments shouted. His bride, half his height and a girl no older than Agnes, stared straight ahead, looking like she had a foul smell under her nose. 'Ower full of herself that one,' muttered a watching wifey.

Agnes dithers outside the front door, but there's no point in begging for her old job back. She wanders off down the pends. The last time she felt a wee bit of joy was in the banter she and Thomas shared walking here. The tide is well out, the boats lying on their sides in the mud. Sinking down behind a stack of creels, she covers her face with her hands. She tells herself that there are worse things than working as a whore.

She stands in the doorway, trying not to wrinkle her nose at the reek of spilt ale and sweat. The inn keeper looks her up and down. 'Come back when ye've got some flesh on those bones. A man likes something soft to lay upon.'

Agnes holds out her hands. 'I can clean and cook.'

He shakes his head.

The tide has turned and soon the harbour will fill with water. It flows in, black in the gathering dusk. She'll go to the kirk first, make her confession and hope the Lord will have mercy upon her soul. She shuffles along the pier like an old woman. It's a long time since she ate, but she doesn't care.

'Agnes?'

Strong hands grasp her shoulders and she looks up into Thomas's blue eyes.

* * *

The new wife doesn't want Agnes for her servant, but Thomas is not to be gainsaid. The old master, hunched by the fire, ignores her. He's dead by the next winter, and not much mourned. Agnes is careful to call Thomas 'master', however she might think of him.

His wife brings forth a daughter, and a son quickly follows. Agnes is present for both births, all attention on trying to calm the mistress who thrashes and cries, pleading for it to be over, and will not help herself. It's thanks to the midwife's capable hands that each child is delivered safely.

Thomas is pleased to have his heir, but it's his wee lassie, bright as a silver button, that he loves the best. The wife leaves the marital bed, saying it is enough – she is the daughter of an earl and should not have to endure further. Agnes notices that Thomas doesn't seem overly troubled.

'It was my father?' he asks one day.

Agnes nods. 'My bonny fisher lad and me, we had nae mair than a cuddle, and then he was gone.'

She gazes up at him. Already gap-toothed and gaunt, he's certainly no bonny — but his heart is good. And when he looks to her for comfort, she welcomes it. The old master she had tolerated, as she must. This time is different.

Her daughter Grissel is born, a lusty one who feeds well. And she sees that Thomas cares for this wee lassie, almost as much as the daughter born in wedlock. Agnes is as content as a poor, and sinful, woman can be. Of course there is the mistress, thrawn and bitter like her predecessor, but Agnes is careful to keep her eyes down and do her work. The mistress may guess, but most likely she thinks it's a price worth paying to avoid further childbirth.

She sees Effie in the market sometimes but Agnes always walks on by, however much Effie may want to stop for a blether. Her brother Geordie comes once, asking for money and she gives it to him, telling him not to come again for she will give no more.

The pestilence passes through St Andrews but it does not touch their home. Perhaps the Lord is watching over her. Even so, she'll not leave herself unprotected a second time. She can neither read nor write, but nevertheless insists a contract is drawn up and duly notarised. Now she owns a wee house and a little siller comes her way.

Another year passes and Effie, trauchled and tearful, comes sidling by the geese. She crosses her hands over her heart saying her family are made homeless. Agnes stares, eyes narrowed and bites down on her lip. Effie's head may be hanging, but she stands her ground. Finally Agnes, knowing herself for a gullible fool, agrees. No rent is ever paid and Agnes, feart of tempting the Devil, does not demand it — for truly her life is now blessed.

This story is a prequel to *The Castilians*.

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About VEH Masters



VEH Masters was born and brought up on a farm a few miles from St Andrews in Scotland. Her debut novel tells the story of the siege of St Andrews Castle in 1546 and closely follows the actual events.

The sequels are set in Antwerp and Venice respectively, and although she has no ties with either city it was great fun visiting them for research.

She's fascinated by the impact of momentous events on the lives of ordinary people.

For updates on her writing and research do sign up for her newsletter here. <https://vehmasters.com/newsletter>