

The Cruel Sister

Traveller's Tales No.2

There was, when the summers were warmer and winters were colder, a Lord who lived in a fine hall with his Lady and their two beautiful daughters, in a pleasant, green valley. The lord was a big man, ruddy and robust, with auburn hair and foxy-whiskered. The Lady was his opposite, willowy and slender, skin as creamy as new-grown lilies and eyes the colour of spring mornings. The girls were as different as chalk-and-cheese. Though they were twins, one girl was dark; Bible-black hair, eyes the colour of purple grapes, lips the colour of roses and her skin the colour of warm candlelight. She was called Midwinter. Her sister was golden; hair like summer sunlight on water, eyes the colour of hazelnuts, skin the colour of wheat at harvesting, her lips as tender as apricots; she was known as Midsummer. These two were inseparable, playing together from the first, one as dark as the other was light. As they grew, they became so close they shared everything, eating from one pewter plate, drinking from one silver cup, 'til the courtiers, councillors and servants just called them 'The Twins'. The golden twin was the firstborn and would sometimes tease her sister gently, saying 'I am the oldest sister, so you really should do as I say', before laughing prettily behind her hand.

On their sixteenth birthday a feast and celebration was held for them, with great platters of sumptuous food, flagons of fine wine, pitchers and jug of cider, dancing 'till midnight and songs by Gypsy minstrels. Whilst the men played, the women danced, skirling fiddles and twirling skirts filled the centre of the hall. Later there was tumbling by acrobats and shadow-puppets that made the children jump in fright at the dragons in the stories. Whilst the children watched the entertainments, fortune-tellers went from table to table, revealing the futures of the guests in silver bowls of clear, bright water fresh from the mountain streams. The two girls had their fortunes told that night, after everyone had eaten their fill; the dark twin would meet a handsome young man and fall in love; the light twin would marry. All seemed bright and radiant in their future.



But the fortune-teller, a tawny, russet-haired woman with deep, dark eyes, looked aside from the twins as they sat laughing together at the high table after she was done, making the sign to avert evil omens. None others noticed but Pharaoh's people, who became wary and subdued, pleading tiredness after a long journey to reach the the Lord, Lady and their daughters. They begged their pardon but they must be away, they said, for they would travel on early in the morning. Packing their instruments, juggling balls and costumes away, they left with the promised gold and thanked their hosts, loaded their waggons outside the hall and set off for their camp in the forest nearby.

After they had gone, the dark twin noticed a young man laughing with his father over some story the older man was telling, his smile sweet and his eyes bright. She found herself staring in a fashion most unbecoming, but she could not help it. Her heart beat faster, her breath came quicker, her cheeks flushed and her eyelids fluttered at the sight of him.

'Sister', she asked her golden twin, 'Who is that young man with his father?' Her sister's gaze passed around the hall, seeking out the young man.

'Why that is the young lord of the country over the mountains; a fair land of green hills, sheep, cattle and horses. His father is, they say, related to Owen Tudor, the old king's grandfather.' She turned her gaze upon her dark sibling and recognised the signs she saw; her sister had fallen in love! At that, her own heart gave a sudden twist and for the first time she knew envy, writhing like a serpent in her stomach. Shortly after she left the feast, pleading a headache and leaving her mother a little concerned for her well-being.

'It's only the excitement of the birthday feast', her husband said, 'She will be herself again tomorrow, you'll see.'

But in the days and weeks following the feast, the two sisters were changed in their behaviour towards one another; the dark twin no longer paid much attention to her sister's talk, distracted by her new-found feelings and thoughts of the young man over the mountains. Often she would sit gazing into the The bright twin grew more chill toward her besotted sister, her nut-brown eyes turning cooler and greener, her glances more calculating and her face more shuttered, hiding her thoughts. Their parents noticed the change and wondered about it; 'What can have happened?' they asked each other, then they asked the chamberlain and finally spoke to the ladies' maids. But no one could account for this sudden distance between the twins, so they had no choice but to ask their daughters one evening at dinner.

The dark girl flushed, her cheeks reddening under her parents' gaze. 'I have to tell you something', she said, 'I have fallen in love. He is the young man from over the mountain who was here, with his father, on our birthday.' She looked down at her hands in her lap, twisting her embroidered handkerchief through her fingers, then looked up at her mother and father, appealing to them with a soft gaze. 'I have thought of him since, though I haven't spoken of it,' she said.

Her parents smiled, relieved that it was nothing terrible and looked fondly on their child; a grown young woman now, with her heart on her sleeve, it seemed. Her sister, however, remained silent, brooding and staring darkly at her twin, her golden hair stiff with suppressed infuriation. Her parents noticed, but thought it only girlish pique.

'We shall invite them both to the spring fair,' her father told her, smiling indulgently at his dark daughter.

Her mother gently took the girl's hand and whispered, 'Let's see what we can do to make him notice you, shall we? A new gown of fine linen, embroidered with lilies and cornflowers at the neck and wrists, perhaps...'

The dark girl blushed prettily and thanked them both, her excitement shining in her face; but her sister's glance was cold and a little cruel.

'What shall I wear to the spring fair, mother?' she asked sharply, surprising her parents with her tone.

'You shall both have new gowns,' said her father, 'and coifs of fine silk.' He rose and beckoned to the chamberlain and the treasurer; 'Find silks of the finest quality for the gowns and bring me Mistress Quickly, the seamstress, please', he said to them.

And in no time at all, the gowns were made, the preparations for the fair in place and the guests, including the young man and his father from over the mountain. The hawkers, hunters and foragers had brought in boar, deer and spring greens for the cooks to make a sumptuous feast. The traders and merchants had set up their stalls and booths on the village green, whilst the Gypsies had brought their tumbling, acrobatics and magic to delight and entrance the crowds. Even a group of mummers came to play the story of George and the Dragon on the stage made from the back of a cart. The Travellers came with their wares and one or two fine colts and mares to trade, for the winter had been a hard one and the horses had had a hard time of it, with the cruel winds and snows. Still, the lord was impressed with the quality and spirit of the colts and mares, buying one palfrey each for his daughters and a young colt for the stables to replace his own steed one day, as he was getting a little old now.

The young man from over the mountain, Gwyion, was careful to pay court to both sisters, sensing perhaps that to pay too much attention to one or the other would be to cause strife amongst the sisters. Even so, the dark girl was radiant at the fair and the feasting, catching his eye more often than not and the shining, golden sister grew jealous and bitter, spite edging her remarks to her sister and her parents, who looked on with concern to see such a change in their daughter. Other young men tried to make themselves known, through the dancing and games, but none could tear the bright girls' eyes away from her sister, Midwinter and the young man Gwyion. At the end of the fair, the situation was clear; young Gwyion asked the Lord and Lady for their blessing for his suite, to court Midwinter through the summer and autumn and arrange a marriage at the Christmas court.

The parents were delighted of course, but a little wary of Midsummer's reaction to the news, which they agreed they would tell her that very evening, after the guests had left and the fair packed up.

The next day, the bright girl asked her sister if she would like to take a walk beside the seaside with her, to find some shellfish for the table that evening, perhaps a crab or two in the rock pools at the shore. The sisters set off with wicker baskets bought from the Gypsies at the fair and a simple lunch of bread, sheep's cheese and apples. They seemed excited to be going off on their walk, enjoying each other's company once again, much to the relief of their parents. The young women made their way down to through the cliff paths to the bay, enclosed by steep cliffs and sea caves, with sand and pebbles on the beach where bladderwrack and seaweed washed up after storms. The tide and currents were strong, pulling anyone venturing into the sea who went too far out from shore. Things lost in the bay often washed up along the coast a few miles away, but the sisters had been warned since they were small not to step out into the waves further than was safe; even the fishing boats, sailing off the coast that morning, would be no help in an emergency, as the currents pulled and swirled in tricky, unpredictable ways. The sailors swore they would not learn to swim, they'd rather be pulled under straight away than struggle against the tide for hours, they said.

Midsummer asked her sister to step out to the rock pools furthest from the beach, as this was where they would find the fattest crabs, she said. So Midwinter tucked her gown up in her kirtle and stepped lightly across the stones and rocks, seemingly not troubled by the sharpness or roughness of them. Her sister followed a little behind carefully and more slowly choosing her path across the rocks, slippery with spume and seaweed.

'Look sister' the bright girl said, 'far out to sea, is that a great merchant ship on the horizon?'

Her dark sister stood and shading her eyes with her slender hand, stared across the shining sea. Suddenly, she felt a great push and plunged headlong into the waves crashing against the rocks. Shock stopped her breath as she sank with the weight of her gown, filling with water, whilst the sea slammed her into the sharp stones, tearing her clothes and her skin. She tried to reach up through the green, foamy sea, her hand just clearing the waves, desperate to reach her sister on the rocks, but she felt no rescuing grip, no friendly hand in hers to pull her from the treacherous waves and she sank, pulled under by the currents and backwash from the sea as it crashed against the shore.

Her sister stood, stiff with the horror of what she had done, watching the hand flail in the air then disappear under the surf never to reappear. A dreadful scream came from somewhere close by, before she realised it was her own voice and she fell to her knees on the sharp rocks, careless of the scrapes and cuts that they would make on her gown and her own skin. Gabbling incorrectly when the first of the too-late rescuers arrived from the hall, she could not tell them what had happened and fainted away as the retainers and then her parents took her into the hall and her chamber, desperate to understand where her sister was and what had befallen her. Only in the evening of the next day, when poppy-juice and wine had been

administered by the local apothecary (a monk at the abbey nearby) and Midsummer's tremors had ceased, to be replaced by a dull, wan gaze into the fire and silent tears falling from her eyes, did the no-longer shining girl whisper the story she had conceited for all to here; a tragic tale of her sister being washed off the rocks by a huge, sudden wave, immediately sinking below the turbulent, dark sea. All agreed who heard the tale that nothing could have been done, the loss of Midwinter was in no way the fault of her sister. The hall was draped in black and purple, mirrors covered and windows shut to the sunlight of the late spring. All through the summer, the chambers of the Lord, Lady and Midsummer lay covered in gloom. The only brightness came from the visits of Gwyion from over the mountain, sometimes with his father but more often not, as he turned his courtship away from his lost love and towards her sister instead. Steadily the suite progressed and Midsummer grew more beautiful in her grief, tragic and pale but lovelier in her sorrow. By autumn, Gwyion had persuaded the Lord and Lady to let him proceed with the engagement and marriage plans for the winter.

After a particularly violent storm that autumn, a travelling minstrel found a pile of the slenderest bones amongst the pebbles, on a beach along the coast, ivory and perfect, washed ashore with the tide. Telling no one of his find, he carved and fashioned the most exquisite harp from the bones, decorated it with mother-of-pearl and inlaid with silver. He became famous for this harp, as all who listened had heard none sweeter. The harp had the voice of a maiden or an angel, people said. When he played the saddest songs, the harp seemed to sing with him, echoing each tragic word of the tale and the audience would weep openly, their hearts broken for the fate of the heroes and heroines of old. An especial favourite of all who listened was the oldest song of all, the tale of Troy and shining Helen, Paris who stole her away and Menelaus, Agamemnon and Odysseus pursuing across the wine dark sea. The fate of doomed Achilles and Patroclus, his love, killed at the battle around the ships of the Greeks brought sobs to the mouths of men and women listening, while Hector's terrible death from enraged Achilles, revenging himself for the death of Patroclus, wrenched their very heart strings. The harp would sing of the grief of Andromache, Hector's wife as she watched him dispatched by Achilles on the fields before the citadel; it would sing of Helen's regret at stealing away from Sparta with Paris and the despair of Hecuba as she watched the last of her sons slaughtered. Before long, the Lord and Lady had heard of the minstrel and his wonderful harp and invited him to the wedding feast of Midsummer and Gwyion at the Christmas court.

The main feasting had finished when the Lord beckoned the minstrel to the seat by the fire, in the place of honour. The guests quieted to hear the tales they knew and loved best, sung with such passion and such exquisite playing. The minstrel found himself carried away by his playing and singing, as if another stood at his shoulder, joining her voice to his, plangent and powerful. Suddenly the harp began singing another song, gently segueing into a tragic narrative that harboured the sorrow of the sea, the cries of the gulls and the loss of love.

'There sits the sister who murdered her own kin', it sang, 'Terrified she sits beside her husband-to-be that was promised to another. Fearful is he, as he swiftly forgot his first love for her sister, his promise to her to love only she. Weeping sit the parents as the harp sings, the voice of their daughter lost to the sea, drowned by her cruel sister out of jealousy and spite; what will they do now they know? Ashen-faced her father stares in horror at the bright twin, but father it is too late to save your dark daughter. She lives on only in this harp made from her breast-bone and ribs, singing while the minstrel plays his songs - no other life has she now, but this...'

Midwinter's voice from the harp became stronger, fuller and soared amongst the rafters of the hall, bringing all within to tears. The twin's mother was aghast, her face a mask of dread and misery, while the bright girl burned with shame and anger at her crime being discovered; she had murdered her sister to take her lover for herself, whilst he had callously switched his affections to the surviving young woman, his shame now clear as day in the hall, writ large upon his no-longer handsome face. No one could now celebrate a union built upon such a sin and deceit.

The minstrel stood, stunned at the harp in his hands, staring wildly about him at the couple on the dais and the Lord and Lady, wrapped together in grief. As the last notes slowly faded from the strings, he gently caressed the harp, wrapping it softly in an embrace of sorrow, tenderness and love. He knew that he could never again come to this hall and play, never again take up the harp under these rafters. He looked up at the Lord and Lady, their faces stained with tears and motioned at the harper's bag; the Lord nodded slowly, giving him permission to leave and motioning to the treasurer to give the minstrel not one but two fine silk purses filled with gold. The minstrel slowly placed the instrument into the leather satchel he'd painstakingly made to carry and protect the beautiful harp, bowed slowly to the Lord and Lady, then turned away and left by the great doors that stood open, with only the sound of weeping and grief behind him...