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The Silver Cup

The Silver Cup

by

Erin Avery

Long ago there lived a wise and kindly king. When his queen died, she left him with three daughters who were all very comely, but the elder two had bad hearts. The youngest was a happy child and knew no wrongdoing, and so her elder sisters scorned her and did all manner of mischief, blaming their younger sister for it all. 'We saw her do it!' they would cry; and since they always took care never to be caught themselves, the King believed their words, and often punished the youngest. As they grew older, the King at last favoured his two elder daughters, but mistrusted the younger one, who slept many nights on a bed bedewed with her own tears.

But one thing follows another, as the saying goes. So one day the two elder sisters said to each other, 'Why do we wait for our father's death to inherit his kingdom when it is almost ours for the taking now? We shall poison the King and blame it on our little sister: as usual, she shall have all the trouble and we shall have all the gain: for no one believes in her goodness now.'

So one day, not long afterwards, the

King sat at table with his three daughters, and they all had a merry time. But it wasn't long before the King grew pale and weak, and for three days he was near death. He would have died too, had it not been for the Fair King who had come to pay him a visit. This was Aroïn, of whom many tales of the Fair Folk tell, but he also comes into some of the tales of men. He gave the King a vial to drink which drew away the disease, and soon after he recovered. In the meantime, the King's cup was found to have had poison in it, and the two elder daughters said: 'Ah, we saw our younger sister put some powder in our father's cup; but she told us it was spice for his wine!'

At these words the youngest daughter wept, for she loved her father and saw now the cruel plan of her older sisters. She denied their words, but was not allowed to speak against them, so her testimony did her no good. But Aroïn saw love, not malice on her face and so, unknown to them all, he looked deeply into her eyes, and the eyes of her sisters as well.

And he was astonished. For he saw only

spite and greed in the hearts of the two eldest daughters, and after that their hands and heart seemed black to him, though outwardly they appeared humble and innocent enough. But in the youngest he saw only a sorrow that would sometimes overpower mirth, yet her heart and hands were like silver. And this troubled the Fair King's mind, so he told their father: 'Friend, I perceive that the truth here is hidden, for some unknown malice is at work, though the evil deed seems clear enough.' And for the friendship between them, he counseled the King to send them all to a hermit he said lived nearby, who had a silver cup. For he said: 'Whoever tells the hermit his name may drink from the cup, and bring back some token from it which shall prove his innocence or his guilt. For the truth is that each of thy daughters stands to gain from thy death, as they are thine only heirs.' And because Aroïn had said that the truth seemed hidden to him, the King agreed to withhold judgment for a time, but he said he would not be surprised to find that the guilty one was none other than his youngest daughter, though it grieved his heart to say it.

So the three daughters were given leave to seek the hermit, but only each alone. At first the two elder sisters were troubled, but they thought to themselves 'I shall do well if I tell the hermit my name is Æla'--that is, if they lied and called themselves by the name of their younger sister whom they knew to be innocent. Thus they hoped to betray her and each other, and each alone to win the favour of their father in order to become sole heir of the kingdom. 'Besides,' they thought, 'who can know the difference?' and they took heart again. Only Æla sought the hermit unafraid, for she knew her innocence and in her heart she hoped to bring back some token of the truth whereby her father would believe in her, and come to love her again.

The eldest daughter was sent out first. She found the hermit as he sat in the door of a little cottage. The hermit saw her too and

said: 'I see some heaviness on thee, child, what is thy name?'

'Æla', she replied, and she told him all about the poisoning of her father and how she came to seek the hermit in order to save her life. So the hermit gave her to drink from the silver cup. 'Justice be done thee,' he said. 'Drink all of this cup, and at the bottom shall appear a sign for the fruit of thy words; a true token that shall prove thee.'

Thereupon she drank all the wine that was in the cup. For a moment the taste was good; but it quickly changed and turned her stomach like vinegar. When this passed, she looked into the cup and there at the bottom lay a perfect pearl. 'Behold thy words!' said the hermit; but by that time the maiden was off, the precious thing clutched tightly in her hands, with never any thanks nor farewell wishes for the hermit.

Not long afterwards the second sister set out, and she found the hermit wandering in the road. She pretended to be as innocent as a dove, though she was no less guilty than the eldest who first spoke with the hermit. The holy man said to her: 'I see some heaviness on thee, child, what is thy name?' 'Æla', she answered, and like the eldest had done, she told him all about her father's poisoning and that she sought the holy man to save her life. And the hermit gave her to drink from the cup. As with the elder sister before her, it tasted sweet at first, but soon turned her stomach bitter. Yet when the sickness passed she looked into the cup and, behold! another pearl was at the bottom. The hermit said: 'Behold thy words!' but she too ran off without even thanking the old man.

Thus it was that both wicked sisters thought they had fooled the hermit by using Æla's name, and they said to themselves: 'Have I not received a pearl for all my trouble?' And too, each thought the hermit would now disbelieve Æla when she told him her name, and hoped to obtain a curse thereby for their younger sister.

Now when Æla set out she found the hermit kneeling at prayer in a little clearing, deep in the forest. 'Hail holy father!' she said, and he returned her greeting. Then he said: 'I see some heaviness on thee, child; what is thy name?'

'Æla,' she replied.

'What troubles thee, Æla?' he asked. And there she told him all her troubles, how she was often punished by her father for things she never did. Her heart was open before the holy man, who sat still and listened quite to the end of her words without saying anything, nor did he look in the least unkindly at her for the tale she told.

But when she finished, he stood and said: 'Justice be done thee. Drink all of this cup, and at the bottom shall appear a sign for the fruit of thy words: a true token that shall prove thee.' Then she drank from the cup as her sisters had done. At first, and only for a moment, the taste of the wine was very strong; but she endured it until it sweetened and warmed her. Then it was as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her, and she laughed with a happy heart as she had not done for many a year. Then she looked into the cup and at the bottom was a thorn as big as her thumb.

'Behold thy words!' said the hermit, and she was glad, for she took the thorn as a sign of her vindication. Then Æla thanked the old man with all her heart, for she did not yet know about the fair tokens her sisters had received. Then she asked what good thing she might do for the hermit, for she was grateful that he was holy enough to have such gifts to give her. 'I have no need,' he replied, 'but one day I may ask a boon of thee. For now, fare well.' And so at that she left him with a spring in her step and a new light on her face, promising him that, one day, whatever he might ask of her he should have, if it was within her power to give.

Soon after, like her sisters before her, Æla returned home again. The day of the King's judgment drew near, and all the sisters met in

the King's High Hall. The King was solemnly seated on his throne, and Aroin stood at his right hand. The whole Court was present, and a great number of people besides. When all were assembled the King commanded his daughters to show forth their tokens all at one time, and so they did. But when it was seen that the two elder girls had pearls, and the younger one a thorn, the King grew very angry at Æla and she wept bitter tears.

But before he could pronounce judgment on her, Aroin said to his friend: 'Sire, a cup was given thee for poison, and a cup has also brought these tokens. Now, if thy daughters swallow their tokens they shall have fully and truly partaken of their cups, and their doom shall be as complete as thy doom would have been hadst thou fully partaken of thine own cup and had no help from me. And by this, I think, thou shalt see a great marvel.' 'I agree,' answered the King, and each of the daughters were commanded to swallow their tokens. The two pearls went down easily enough, and the two elder sisters smiled in triumph. But Æla choked on her thorn, and had to be supported by two knights standing nearby, for she almost fainted at the pain.

In an instant, the fair garments of the two elder sisters were changed into dirty rags, and they both became as ugly hags. Meanwhile, Æla's garments grew fairer and fairer, and a glimmering brightness shined forth from her face and made her clothes look as if they had been dipped in a sea of sunshine.

When the King saw this he exclaimed, 'But how can this be?'

At these words the elder sisters fell down before him and confessed all their evil deeds, how they had done many mischiefs and blamed them all on Æla; for they had spoken to the holy man, and the power of the cup was still upon them. The King said: 'At last I have the truth', and he knelt at Æla's feet, begging her to forgive his mistrust and past maltreatment of her. And Æla replied: 'Dear father, I do forgive thee, for I have ever loved

thee; besides, how couldst thou have known otherwise?’

With that the King rose up suddenly and said, ‘Yes, how could I or anyone else have known otherwise?’ And straightway he let the sentence of death fall on the two elder sisters, and he would not repent it, not even when Æla herself begged and pleaded with him to spare them. ‘Nay,’ said he, ‘for their lives have been founded on lies and murderous envy: by these they plotted against us both. We cannot risk such treachery again, nor allow it to go unpunished, for it may breed other like troubles as long as these two live, both for us and for any who may chance to fall under their power.’ And so the elder sisters were placed in two barrels bored all over with many holes, and cast into the sea. After this there was a celebration, and the King raised Æla in honour before all the people small and great, and he loved her more than all he had until the day he died, always giving good gifts and fair words to her.

And so it was that the years of bliss Æla had with her father numbered thrice the space she endured unjust punishment. All this time she never lost her beauty nor her youth, for she had given her name to the holy man, and the power of the cup remained upon her. When at last her father died, she inherited his kingdom, for the King never took another wife, and therefore never had any other children. She proved a wise and noble queen, and was remembered for the many merits of her goodness, even to this very day.

But one day not long after her father’s death, the hermit paid Æla a visit. During that time of the year it was her custom to sit on the throne of judgment; and he brought with him two others: Aroin the Fair King, and a man who followed behind with his head bowed, wearing a stained and tattered cloak. ‘I have come to claim a boon from thee,’ the hermit said, ‘as thou promised me long ago.’

‘What shalt thou have?’ Æla answered ‘If it is in my power to give, it is thine.’

‘My desire is that thou wilt have this man in marriage,’ he answered, and he motioned to the bedraggled man. ‘For it is not good to rule alone. He has seen thy beauty from afar and wishes that thou wilt receive his love, and has asked me to speak for him.’

At this the Queen was troubled, for though the young man seemed good of face and gentle of heart, and very hale--indeed, he looked as likely a man as she had ever seen--still, he was wretchedly clad, and she wondered what might come of him. So she said to the hermit: ‘This may not be in my power to do, for I may only wed one who is noble and true of heart. None born for base deeds should approach the throne entrusted to me by my father, and so I ask what kind of man he is, and from what people he comes.’

‘Well hast thou spoken,’ said the man dressed in rags, and he threw off his cloak. And everyone saw that he was richly arrayed, as a mighty prince in past days of high legend, and there was strength and life and joy in his eyes. He strode towards the Queen and said gently: ‘I seek not a throne of power, fair Æla: but only the flower of thy love.’

‘For now thou dost behold,’ answered Aroin, ‘my very son.’ The queen was overjoyed at these words, and a new happiness came into her soul. ‘Now are all my hurts removed and my heart truly healed’ she said, and all those who heard these words wondered at the saying. Then she called for a Feast to be prepared, and the four of them made merry together day and night for many days. Æla and the Fair Prince spoke many happy words together, and each enjoyed the company of the other very much indeed.

They were soon married; Æla lived long in peace all the rest of her days, and had many children and grandchildren besides. When her firstborn son became a man, he was given the throne of his mother: for Æla went to dwell with her husband, in his kingdom, the Fair Land of the Fair Folk; and she lives with him there to this very day.