

# THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPISODE



ZERO

THIS BEING THE GENESIS OF A MERCIFULLY BRIEF AND SLIGHTLY DIVERTING INTERLUDE PREPARED FOR THE LIMITED AMUSEMENT OF THE GENERAL MASSES TO PASS THE TIME IN AN OTHERWISE FALLOW AND BARREN PERIOD IN THE HISTORY OF OUR SPECIES. AS SUCH IT IS OFFERED HERE ON THIS TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF OCTOBER, TWO THOUSAND AND NINE YEARS FOLLOWING CERTAIN EVENTS UNRELATED TO THE MATERIALS CONTAINED HEREIN WHICH SPEND MORE CONCERN ON MATTERS RELATED TO THE BLIGHT OF ALCOHOLIC INDULGENCE UPON THE HUMBLE RODENT EXPLOITED THEREAFTER IN EXPLICIT POSE AND TABLEAUX FOR THE AMUSEMENT OF THE NOUVEAU RICHE AND THE ADORNMENT OF THEIR PREPOSTEROUS ANCILLARY DOMICILES IN WHICH THEY ARE INDULGED FOR NO OTHER CAUSE THAN THE ELEVATION OF THEIR STATUS WITHIN A PLATEAU CASTE UNABLE TO ESTABLISH AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH, NOR INTELLECTUAL RESPECT FOR, THE OBSCURITIES CONTAINED HEREIN. ALSO, THE DEVIL SETTLES DOWN FOR A WHILE AND GETS A BIT OF TAIL. ✱

# BOTTLE OF SHADOWS

by T.M. Camp

She didn't know he was The Devil until their wedding day, when all the demons came to church.

The bride's side of the congregation was filled to overflowing with neighbors, friends, and relatives. Everyone in their Sunday best — shirts starched, shoes polished, faces scrubbed.

The townspeople did their best to ignore the other side of the church, the Groom's side. They resisted the urge to twitch their noses at the smell wafting across the aisle — the subtle scent of rotten eggs and sulfur borne by the warm autumn breeze. They did their best to be polite, though some couldn't help but glance across uneasily at the yellow eyes and sunburned faces on the other side.

They did their best.

For their part, the demons did try to be on their best behavior as well — well, at least as much as can be expected of demons. There were a few missing children at the end of the day, a handful of ravished virgins, perhaps a dozen or so desecrated prayerbooks. But all in all, they were very considerate. A few even shed steaming tears at the loveliness of the ceremony.

They did their best.

For it was lovely. The bride was lovely. She'd always been the prettiest girl in town. Gentlemen callers — some handsome, some wealthy, even a few who were both — had come from miles around to court her, but she had refused them all. Even the most determined couldn't catch her, couldn't persuade her into long

walks or hay rides or impromptu kissing games in the parlor. She resisted them all, quite to the consternation of her father and mother.

“Good things don’t last forever,” her mother clucked one evening, washing up the many teacups left in the wake of desperate young suitors. “You should make up your mind before they change theirs.”

“Fiddle-dee-dee,” her daughter replied, rattling the saucers with her clumsy fingers.

Her father didn’t say a word. He simply glowered from his chair in the parlor.

This went on for some time. Many gentleman callers, many afternoon visits, many teacups.

Finally, one evening after the last of her little host of admirers had slowly and reluctantly dragged off into the night, The Devil came to call.

She was sitting on the porch, making the most of the cool evening breeze — one hand resting at her throat, her eyes raised to the stars. A vain girl, sometimes she fancied as though those stars might be admiring her, their yellow eyes looking down on her loveliness, winking and warm.

As she gazed upwards, one star fell, sending a thrill through her as it traced liquid fire across the face of the night.

The evening went calm, the breeze softened, and the nighttime hum of summer faded. She sat waiting, nerves singing like a plucked piano wire, straining as if to hear something just out of range.

Then, from the front path she heard a foot grind against the gravel. She dropped her eyes to a shadow

standing outside the gate of her father's house. She half-rose as a voice — his voice! — called to her, asking her name.

Calming herself, she replied "Come up to the porch. There's a cool breeze to enjoy."

And, in the dark, she heard him smile.

His feet made hollow sounds on the wooden steps and he stood off from her, half in shadow. His face was burnt deeply, almost glowing in the darkness. His hair, very black. His smiling eyes twinkled with yellow lamplight from the parlor windows.

And there, sitting on the porch of her father's house, after months of tiresome Sunday afternoons, she made her choice. Finally. She chose a stranger before she knew his name, chose a man before he had chosen her.

Before he had spoken a word of love, her heart had already replied.

He was traveling, he told her parents, seeing the world. He'd begun in the Far East and had already circled back again, moving over the world and walking through towns and cities and kingdoms. He found their little scrap of the country so appealing — and his eyes never leaving their daughter's face as he spoke — he was considering staying on for awhile.

At this, her parents looked at each other, nodded discreetly, and invited their future son-in-law to stay for supper.

Her mother was impressed by his manners, as all mothers are. He was polite, his eyes were kind, and when he laughed she flushed girlishly, surprised at the

sudden memory of a boy she'd known one summer years before.

Her father on the other hand, looked over The Devil's fine clothes, his brightly polished boots, his heavy purse, and he smiled . . . thanking God for wealthy, foolish strangers.

Later outside, The Devil stole a kiss from her — he standing on one side of the gate, she on the other.

The next night, they took a walk in the garden under the stars.

The third night, he set her ablaze with his love. So much, she thought the whole south pasture might have been scorched all around them and the blanket they'd laid down.

Afterwards he asked for her hand in marriage.

Still steaming from his touch, she breathlessly agreed.

Upon hearing the news from their daughter's singed lips, her mother wept for joy while her father danced a jig on the kitchen tiles.

By the next afternoon, the whole countryside burned with the news: A foreign stranger had come to steal away their brightest jewel for his own. Young men walked the streets, their eyes moist with bitter disappointment. But young women quietly smiled on their way to purchase extra cakes and teacups.

After a few weeks of breathless planning, the wedding day arrived. Invitations had been sent and RSVPs

returned. The baker worked through the night to supply an assortment of delicacies. The whole town faintly buzzed with anticipation all through the morning.

One by one the wedding guests began to arrive that afternoon — that is to say, the out-of-town guests arrived. They came, it seemed, from the four corners of the earth. And dark they were, with yellow eyes.

They entered the church cautiously, sitting stiffly in the pews. A few gamely tried to puzzle their way through the prayerbook. But they soon gave up, staring like tourists at the stained glass and plaster saints surrounding them.

“You’d think they’d never been in a church before,” one of the bride’s aunts sniffed to her husband. And he, catching sight of those yellow eyes shining yellow in the candlelight, didn’t answer.

The Devil took his place with the Rector at the front of the church, smiling warmly to the congregation. The Rector was a kind fellow. Having known many a nervous young groom, he smiled reassuringly as he patted The Devil’s shoulder. Grimacing, he drew back a scorched palm.

Everyone rose as the bride — the beautiful, beautiful bride — entered on her father’s arm.

“I do.” The Devil said a little while later.

From the congregation, a brief murmur rose and fell away.

His bride spoke next. “I take thee to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death

do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

And then, The Devil kissed his bride.

The Rector presented them to the congregation:  
"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

In His house, God always has the last word.

And with that, all of the wedding guests shuffled out to the reception hall while the bells overhead rang and rang.

"I'm telling you, there's something funny about him."

"What?"

Gaines, the town's tobacconist, raised his voice to be heard over the band. "I said, don't you think there's something funny about the groom?"

"Aw. . . he's a great old fella," came the reply.

Gaines shook his head. "No, he's funny somehow. Funny-strange, I mean, not funny-funny. Look how he dances. If that's not funny, I don't know what is."

His companion, a little bit worse for wear thanks to the wine, angled his bleary eyes to the dancing bride and groom. After a moment he slurred, "I dunno, I've always thought he was a pretty good dancer, m'self. He's famous for it, really. Always has been, since the early days."

Gaines blanched and turned to find himself eye-to-yellow-eye with one of the groom's guests. He swallowed thickly. "Oh? You don't say?"

"I do." The demon emptied his glass. "Serves good wine, too," he said. "What's a wedding without wine?"

Gaines watched as the demon staggered off for more. Then, setting down his own glass untasted, he went off to find his wife.

It happened sometime near the end of the evening, as these things always do. And although everyone had their own version of events afterwards, one thing was agreed upon: The marriage wouldn't last.

The bride and groom were dancing, all of the guests gathered around the dance floor, when the beautiful and clumsy bride slipped. Down she went, pulling her husband after her.

The crowd roared with laughter, demons and townsfolk alike taking her spill for drunkenness. Breathlessly, the groom stood to rise, offering a red hand to his bride.

Gasps echoed around through the hall. When he fell, the groom's pantlegs had ridden up . . . revealing hairy goat's legs and brightly polished hooves beneath.

"The devil!" The townspeople drew back with a gasp. One of the women fainted dead away. The demons, all a little drunk, glanced around stupidly.

The bride rose, clinging to her husband.

“Give me my daughter, fiend!” Her father made to pull her from him.

“No,” The Devil replied.

Her father stepped forward, fists clenched at his sides.

“Father, no!” the bride cried.

The Devil smiled. He stepped forward, facing his father-in-law.

The townspeople moved in a body, gathering in support.

Behind The Devil, his demon guests stood at the ready. They’d been on their best behavior all day, and it was beginning to wear a little thin. A scrap would do them no end of good.

Her father eyed The Devil’s reinforcements. “She’s my only daughter,” he said weakly.

The Devil shrugged. “She’s my only wife.” Behind him, his guests snickered in appreciation.

Outraged, her father raised his hand to strike the first blow. But before he could swing, a red and hairy hand shot out to arrest the gesture.

“Those whom God hath joined together...” The Devil quoted gently.

His new father-in-law struggled, his wrist blistering from the heat of his son-in-law’s hand.

The townsfolk moved in closer, murmuring drunken support.

The bride wailed in fear. One of her demon sisters-in-law led her out of the circle, offering vain words of comfort.

Her father lashed out with his free hand and struck the cheek of The Devil a ringing blow.

The demons gasped.

Slowly, The Devil closed his eyes and turned his other cheek to the father.

Everyone waited.

Then, in a fierce gesture, her father embraced his new son-in-law, pulling The Devil close.

Within moments, the band was playing again. The townspeople stood, arm-in-arm with the demons and sang while The Devil and his bride finished their dance, the bride's parents looking on proudly.

The less said about their wedding night, the better. Even The Devil deserves a little privacy.

The next morning, The Devil woke his wife with a kiss. She sat up, stretching and smiling at her husband. She shook her hair in the morning light, watching the dust motes dance.

The Devil made for her to close her eyes. After she had, he placed a small package into her hands.

“What is it?”

But he would only smile in reply.

Her eager fingers tore the brown paper away. Inside, packed carefully with torn paper, she found a beautiful black bottle. She touched it softly, tracing a finger on the smooth surface.

She cried out in surprise. The inky blackness within moved to follow the track of her fingertip, flowing as if with a life of its own. Glancing to her husband, she held the bottle up to a beam of early morning light, marveling at the shadows that flowed and shifted within.

And she laughed.

Her husband smiled at her delight.

She raised her hand to remove the stopper, to sample the exotic perfume within.

With a quick gesture, he stopped her hand. “No, my love. You must never open this bottle.”

Eyes stinging, she asked him why.

Her husband smiled, comforting his wife with small kisses as he answered.

“I’ve given you a gift today, in thanks for the love you’ve given me. But this gift isn’t just for you, it’s for all the world. I’ve done something for you and your kind, my darling. I’ve taken all the evil in the world, all the shadows and darkness, all of the demons . . . and I’ve closed them up in this bottle. Now we are free, all of us, to love and be happy forever. Without fear of darkness, or illness, or shadows.”

She held the bottle in her lap, listening to the furious buzz of her wedding guests within.

It was no longer beautiful, yet it was all the more dear to her.

She set it carefully on the nightstand and drew her husband, formerly The Devil, close to her once more.

And, of course, they lived happily ever after — well, perhaps not ever after . . . but for a good long while, at any rate. Which is more than most can claim. And while they were together, their lives — and the lives of everyone else in the world — were wonderful.

Well, more or less. They did their best. People still were people, after all. There are some things even The Devil can't change.

And on the mantle, the bottle buzzed and hummed, agitated forms flickering within.

From time to time, she would sit and stare at her gift, marveling at her husband's generosity. She wondered at their wonderful life together. She wondered at his gift.

She wondered at his love.

"Would they be as happy if he had left the world as it was?"

She would sit and think, turning the smoky glass over in her clumsy hands, her mind full of doubts and whispers.

The days grew longer, even more joyful, and soon she found that she was with child. The Devil danced her around the cottage when he heard the news.

And, for a time, they were even happier than before.

Her body grew round and full, but her mind was full as well — full of doubt and questions like whispers from the bottle. Often she would sit, running her fingers over the stopper and thinking to herself.

“If our love was true and pure, could any evil harm it? If the world was dark, wouldn’t our love shine out twice as bright? If he loves me now, wouldn’t he love me more? Maybe it’s a test, maybe he really wants me to open the bottle? Maybe, maybe..?”

And on and on.

As her time grew close, her doubt grew as well. She would often take up the bottle, running over in her mind the questions and doubts and fears, again and again.

One evening, as the gentle night fell, she stood in the doorway of their cottage waiting for her husband to return.

In her hands she held the bottle, turning over in her mind all of her doubts and questions.

Clumsy fingers fiddled absently with the stopper — half-pulling it out and then dropping it back into place again.

And inside the bottle, the shadows boiled with rage at her teasing.

She was still standing there, when her husband returned.

The bottle lay on the stoop at her feet, broken and empty.

“I’m sorry,” she said to him. “It was an accident.”

He reached down and picked up the bottle, its once-smooth surface now pitted and scoured. With steaming tears in his yellow eyes, he laid it gently back in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“I know,” he said.

“Do you still love me?”

The Devil stood a long moment in silence. Then he drew her close, kissed her once, his hand resting on her full belly.

“Of course I still love you,” he answered, drawing back.

She felt weak with relief at his words.

“But I have to go back.”

As The Devil, formerly her husband, stepped back into the shadows, she felt the little life within her stir and move.

Afterwards, when she sat on the stoop to watch over her son as he played in the meadow, a curious shadow in the trees would sometimes catch her eye. But

whenever she went close to investigate, nothing and no one was there.

Once she awoke in the night with someone bending over her. She lay there as long as she could stand it. Then a hot and bitter tear fell to steam against her cheek.

But when she sat up, the room was empty and cold.

And there were many, many mornings she found strange prints in the soft ground outside her son's window, like two crescent moons.

The broken, empty bottle still sat on the mantle. From time to time she would take it down, running her clumsy fingers over its dull and cracked surface.

And she would wonder.

FIN ✧

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination — at least, as far as you know. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is unintentional and probably due to some kind of fundamental flaw in your ability to form accurate correlative relationships between conceptual abstractions and reality. You should probably see a doctor about that.

Copyright © 2009 T.M. Camp

*The Gospel of Thomas* is produced and distributed by Aurohn Press.

Despite this, please submit all inquiries (professional or otherwise) to the author via [tmc@tmcamp.com](mailto:tmc@tmcamp.com).

He's the one to blame.

*The Gospel of Thomas* is released under a Creative Commons  
Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives License.

All other rights reserved.

Visit us online at

[www.thegospelofthomasonline.com](http://www.thegospelofthomasonline.com)

NEXT UP?

GHOSTS, PAST AND PRESENT.



LIFT A STONE, AND YOU WILL FIND ME THERE.