

7-15-2007

## ***The Little Brown Bottle***

M. Tatham

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### **Recommended Citation**

Tatham, M. (2007) "*The Little Brown Bottle*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2007 : Iss. 29 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2007/iss29/6>

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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# The Little Brown Bottle

*From The Letters and Papers of Snow White*

by  
M. Tatham

I slip out the back door of the chateau into the orchard. The path is strewn with leaves, and the apples smell delicious.

My maid is waiting beneath a tree. She slips a basket, filled with the ripest of the fruit, over my arm and smiles. I return her smile. At last I am going—at last everything shall be made right with Stepmother.

Outside the orchard wall, Henri's valet is waiting to help me into the carriage. He smiles and winks like a conspirator.

You know me as Snow White, my name is Elise. Today the complexion that earned me my sobriquet is flushed with excitement.

I am acting against Henri's wishes. He still fears what my Stepmother might do. But at the moment that he is riding into the City of Chamois, I am departing for her home in Anjunesse. She is no longer young, and I must seize what might be my last opportunity.

The postilion, mounted on one of four white horses that would pull the carriage, inclines his head to me. The valet opens the carriage door and helped me climb the step-stair.

I settle into the snug conveyance. A lark flits past the window. The sun glistens on a world of scarlet and gold. My hope is now certainty that, by God's good grace, Stepmother and I shall reconcile.

I set the basket on the floorboards. A

horsewhip stings the air and the carriage jolts as the horses start off. I murmur a prayer.

The carriage careens as the horses plunge under the postilion's urging. Wind pours through the open windows and braces me. It seems to approve of my good intentions.

Branches heavy with leaves of bronze fly past; shadows sweep over me; I lay my hand on my purse, beside me on the upholstered bench, and feel the edges of my Psalter.

We stop at a tavern where I alight briefly for breakfast, then hasten on.

At the signpost for Anjunesse, a Traveler is waiting. The postilion hurries the carriage by him. I look back and notice the Traveler's dark, plumed hat. He turns to watch the carriage, which has left him in the dust.

The horses again find their pace. The sun is climbing, and I turn from the glare of the window to find the Traveler seated opposite me, his hat shadowing his eyes.

I stammer, "How did you?—Who let you?" then begin to rap on the wall behind me.

The postilion doesn't hear. I stare at the Traveler.

"I must come with you, Elise," the Traveler says.

"Who are you?! And why do you speak

as though we're acquainted?!"

"We are acquainted."

"Show your face!"

With a walking stick he tips his hat-brim back, revealing a long pale countenance, bold eyes, graying hair, and a black mustache and goatee. One of his eyes is slightly lower than the other, a lack of symmetry that is disturbing.

"Who are you?" I murmur.

"Death."

I lean into the corner. "You're mad!"

He settles his hands atop his walking stick and smiles.

A shudder convulses me. "Whoever you are, secure the postilion's attention! You have no business with me!"

"At some point I have business with everyone—even the fairest."

I lean forward. "Where did you hear that phrase?"

"It is common parlance now that your story is known." He tilts his head. "But I do know you. One might say, well. Time after time, she sent me to you, though I was strangely unsuccessful. You must have a special star shining upon your life."

I bite my lip. "Why have you come to me now . . .?"

"It is time for me to take your Stepmother. And you, shall help me."

"I go to offer her forgiveness—you and I want different things."

"Ah!"

He gazes out the window while I steal glances to study him. The carriage climbs a lane between chestnut trees. I rest a hand on my purse in which my Psalter is, and he notices this.

"The Word of Life," he says, his eyes darkening. "You shall find me in those pages. There is much written about me there."

"You are the last enemy the Lord shall destroy."

I quake at my own temerity. Is it wise to

dispute with one who has silenced so many?

He answers, "For a time I still reign over the affairs of men."

I have no answer for this, and turn my gaze to the city on the hill, Anjunesse with its orchards and groves. Anjunesse, the place where I was unhappy. I can just make out the roof of the palace and notice that some tiles were missing.

Death's voice grates. "Your Stepmother is going to die. You can help her, Elise, by providing a gentler . . . means."

From a pocket he takes a small brown bottle and holds it between a thumb and forefinger. "A few drops, and she will simply go to sleep forever."

I rap on the wall sharply.

The postilion does not hear. His orders are to hurry, and he is whipping the horses up a gravel incline toward the city gates.

The basket of apples slides, and an apple rolls out at Death's feet.

He picks it up and tosses it, up and down, up and down. "Remember what she did to you?" He holds it out to me. "You can have both mercy and revenge."

The plume on his hat flutters, and my curls blow about my face. I begin to entertain his terrible suggestion, and am startled when bells peal.

"You must get down at the gates!" I say in a voice that quivers.

"You haven't yet asked what the alternative is."

I cannot bring myself to ask.

"A lingering death from cancer of the bowels." He smoothed his goatee. "Your choice is clear."

I begin to weep, and am grateful for the dimness of the street.

The postilion enters the palace courtyard and reins in at the doors. The paint on the coat of arms is peeling, and there are no longer guards posted. Flanking the doors are potted roses that perfume the air with an innocent scent.

I clutch my purse and stare at my slippered feet, side by side on the dusty floorboards.

Death exits the carriage.

The postilion dismounts and approaches. He must not be able to see Death, for he looks puzzled when he puts a hand to the door and finds it open a crack.

He offers me a hand. Behind him, Death waits with the small brown bottle.

I sink back on the bench and tighten my shawl around me. If only I'd listened to Henri!

The postilion smiles. "Majesty . . . ?"

"I've changed my mind—I'm going home."

I hear him mutter as he resumes his seat in the saddle. I turn to Death.

"Take Stepmother if you must, but without my help!"

The carriage wheels about, and I see Death staring after it.

We descend the stony road and entered the lane between the chestnuts. A flock of starlings explodes out of the branches and startles me.

I go back to musing. Soon Stepmother will die, an old woman whose nurses unfaithfully desert her. She has probably been thumping her cane on the floor for an hour, and there has been no one to answer but her elderly butler and lady's maid. I didn't even say hello . . . And really, she can't be a threat . . . What will her death be like . . . ?

I conclude that I must see her as planned, and make peace. Convince her of Christ's forgiveness by my own. I can dispatch a courier to Henri, and go home tomorrow morning.

The postilion grunts when I give the order to turn back to Anjunesse. Again the carriage climbs. I select an apple and take a bite. Sweet juice runs down my wrist into my sleeve. I smile, hope again stirring

within me.

For the second time, the postilion greets the sentries in the name of my Stepmother the Duchess. For the second time, we pass into the place where I was so unhappy.

Stepmother's butler, Claude, opens the door and draws me inside, fussing affectionately over me. We embrace, then he leads me upstairs at a pace which tries my patience.

My Stepmother, he stops on the stairs to tell me, now resides in a few rooms on the top floor.

Again we climb. On each landing, I notice dust on the portraits, and covers on the mirrors.

Just as I thought, Stepmother is thumping her cane.

The sound is painful. The vision of her enthroned on a wicker boudoir chair, the smell of the room—her medicines, commode, and person—are overwhelming. Age has its scent, sometimes sweet, sometimes dreadful.

Stepmother smiles, but seeing my glance of pity, adopts a demeanor of dignity.

"Elise," she says and offers her face for my kiss.

As I kiss her I think, for the thousandth time, that she is really much fairer than I. If we had been beauties of the same epoch, she would have outshone me.

"The drops your physician left for me are on the vanity table," she says.

I gape.

"I like him," she continues. "Tell him he may attend me!"

A presentiment chills me. "Who . . . ?"

"The physician you sent—the handsome gentleman in the elegant hat. He left only moments ago. He wrote a note that tells how to administer the drops."

On the vanity table, near the small brown bottle, I find the note. My fingers tremble as I unfold it.

Two drops in her tea at bedtime,  
Majesty. Consider it a mercy. D.

With my back to Stepmother I crumple  
this and, pretending to stir the fire, drop it to  
the grate.

My glance flies back to the bottle.  
“Perhaps you’re feeling well enough to do  
without this? If you can’t sleep, I can read to  
you. If your head hurts, I can rub your  
temples.”

She ignores this. “He makes the perfect  
physician. Without any arrogance, he yet has  
just the right air of authority to promote  
confidence in him.”

“He is an impostor, Stepmother. I did  
not send him.”

She reddens. “What game are you  
playing?! He said that he knows you. That  
you traveled together to Anjunesse, and  
spoke of my health. Surely you remember!”

I go to a chair beside her. “I must tell  
you something that will sound fantastic—”

“Give me the medicine at once! I know  
you—you’re afraid it will do me some good!  
What did he say in his note? Am I to take  
the drops in something to drink?”

I retrieve the bottle and stand not saying  
a word.

Claude raps on the door, then totters to  
the table beside Stepmother with her tea and  
toast.

“You see!” Stepmother’s shrunken  
frame seems to expand with her sense of  
triumph. “The tea is here—is it not? I am  
meant to take the medicine! If you care so  
little about me, Claude shall give it to me.  
Where is the note?”

I grip the bottle and try to think. “No, I  
shall give it to you . . .”

As Claude attempts to tuck a napkin  
under Stepmother’s chin and she pushes his  
hand aside, I notice her ragged fingernails.  
The sight saddens me.

“Stepmother, doesn’t your nurse trim your  
nails?”

“Nurse? She has left me.”

She nibbles her toast as Claude, with an  
injured air, closes the door behind him. I sit  
very still with the bottle in my lap.

With her spoon, Stepmother taps her  
teacup.

“Do as the physician said! Why are you  
frightened? Do you fear I shall outlive  
you?”

“Stepmother, please! Don’t speak such  
utter nonsense!”

Crumbs drop to her bodice. Tears start  
into my eyes. Could this be she who planned  
my demise again and again? Her murderous  
assaults seem dream-like—the nightmares of  
childhood only.

She taps the cup once more. I look up  
startled, and pretend to doctor her tea.

She watches carefully. “You are sly, my  
darling.”

“Why won’t you believe, that I know  
him to be an impostor you shouldn’t trust?  
Why won’t you trust me?”

“I would rather trust him.”

“Ah, yes!—than the child you so  
disliked!”

I remember Henri’s warnings. I think of  
him with longing and despair. I slip the  
bottle into my pocket.

Stepmother’s face grows crimson. I  
worry that she will die of apoplexy. The  
golden balls of the clock on the mantelpiece  
swing and swing, as I ransack my thoughts  
for some solution.

Finding none, I determine to tell the  
truth however absurd it sounds.

“Stepmother, the physician who  
attended you was . . . Death.”

She laughs and spits a crumb. “A fairy  
tale!” Her mouth works furiously. “Give me  
those drops—I shall have them!”

I jump up. My purse drops at my feet,  
and the Psalter tumbles out with the pages  
open.

She glances at it. “So this is why  
you’ve come! To convert me. But you  
realize, don’t you, that I despise all that! I

despise you as well, my angel! You, with your beautiful face with its pretense of innocence!”

“Stepmother!” I wail as I fall at her knees. “Stepmother . . .” I whisper.

For a moment she lays a hand on my hair, then pushes me away. “Get up from that ridiculous posture!”

I gather my purse and Psalter, and stand, feeling in my pocket the few ounces of deadly weight.

“Won’t you at least listen about Jesus?” I ask. “As life is so uncertain?”

“I’ve heard it all—it is not for me.”

I kneel beside her chair. “Then, at least allow me to stay the night and make sure you’re all right. I’ve badly disturbed you.”

“Yes, you have—and you’ve spoiled my supper! Do whatever you like about staying! I want those drops . . .”

These last words are spoken hesitantly, with a question in her eyes.

“But shall not have them!” I cry.

As she watches, objecting and frantic, I step to the fireplace, uncork the bottle, and tip the contents to the flames, a handkerchief over my mouth.

“You imp!” she cries with admiration.

I am laughing. I feel very light. Everything has fallen back into its usual safe place, even her reproaches.

I hear her saying, “. . . You offered to rub my temples . . .” and turn back to her with joy.

“I have a question,” I say.

“Ask it!”

“It is of a personal nature.”

“Oh, Elise!” She gestures toward the furnishings of her room. “I am beyond fastidiousness.”

“Have you noticed blood in your stool?”

She looks surprised, then smiles. “No. And, I am like clockwork. I may outlive you.”

The carriage is hurrying me toward

home. It rocks on the stretch of road near the tavern. The late afternoon is glorious, the trees lit like candles, and the sky cloudless.

The basket at my feet is empty.

Stepmother was pleased with the apples. She said that her lady’s maid—who is half-blind and palsied!—shall make a tart from them. I pray there won’t be a kitchen fire!

My purse sits on the bench beside me. It too is empty of all but trifles, for Stepmother asked me to leave my Psalter in case she wishes to amuse herself within its pages.

At the signpost for Chamois, a Traveler is waiting. The postilion takes the carriage by him. I look back and see his hat. He turns to watch the carriage.

The horses again find their pace. Dusk is reaching slender arms of shadow. I turn from the window and find the Traveler opposite me, his hat-brim tipped back to show his long, asymmetrical face.

I say nothing. I am an imp! Perhaps I will snatch his walking stick and rap him soundly. I smile at the thought.

“You decided against the drops?” he says.

I nod.

“You shall have your revenge in her lingering demise.”

“No, not really.”

He raises his dark eyebrows. “You are certain?”

“Yes.” I look out at the scenes rushing by. “I have chosen life. And prayed.”

He proffers his walking stick and tries to smile. “I suppose you will want to rap for the postilion?”

I turn back to him to say that won’t be necessary, but he is gone. It feels as though he has never been there, though I knew he has. I tremble all over, even my curls tremble. A crimson leaf flew in through the window and rests at my feet.

The carriage sweeps into the chateau

courtyard, braking at the front steps. Henri is waiting for me. He opens the carriage door and lifts me down into his arms, kissing me. That same kiss once wakened me from a death-like slumber.

He studies me in the light from the lantern, and I tilt my head and grin. We begin to laugh, then race the steps two at a time, arm in arm.

THE END

## Soccer Mom

by

Kate Reilly

She laces cleats,  
serves oranges,  
their skin forgotten  
clocks that never got  
around to change  
after midnight,  
and watches the slipper  
shatter before the carriage.  
Unbelievably, the pumpkin  
returns undefeated.