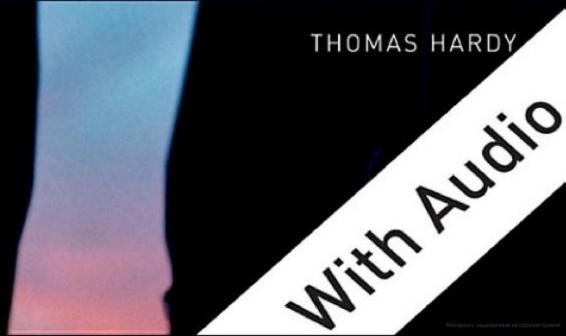




The Three Strangers

and Other Stories



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GLOSSARY

ACTIVITIES: Before Reading

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The Three Strangers

1

The first stranger

In the south-west of England there are many long, low, grassy hills, which have not changed their appearance for centuries. Farmers still keep their sheep on them, and the only buildings are lonely cottages, where shepherds live.

Fifty years ago there was a shepherd's cottage on one of these hills. It was only three miles from the market town of Casterbridge, but it was unusual for travellers to pass this way. There was no road, just two footpaths which crossed in front of the cottage door. During the long winters, snow and rain fell heavily here, which made travelling difficult.

The night of March 28th, 1825, was one of the coldest and wettest that winter, but inside the cottage all was warm and cheerful. Shepherd Fennel had invited family and friends to drink to the health of his youngest child, a recent arrival in the family. Nineteen people were at the party: married women and single girls, shepherds and farm workers, young people talking of love, and old friends talking of the past.

Shepherd Fennel had chosen his wife well. She was a farmer's daughter from one of the valleys, and when she married, she brought fifty pounds with her in her pocket – and kept it there, for the needs of a coming family. She did not like to spend money unnecessarily, and had worried about the kind of party to give that evening. 'At a sit-still party,' she thought, 'the men'll get too comfortable and drink the house dry. But at a dancing-party people get hungry and then they'll eat all our food! We'll have both sitting and dancing – that's the best way.' And secretly she told the fiddler to play for no more than fifteen minutes at a time.

But when the dancing began, nobody wanted to stop. The fiddler refused to catch Mrs Fennel's eye, and played on. The music got louder and louder, and the excited dancers stepped faster and faster. Mrs Fennel could do nothing about it, so she sat helplessly in a corner, as the minutes became an hour.

While this was happening indoors, outside in the heavy rain and darkness a figure was climbing up the hill from Casterbridge. It was a tall, thin man, about forty years old, dressed all in black and wearing thick, heavy boots.

When he reached the shepherd's cottage, the rain came down harder than ever. The man left the footpath and went up to the door. He listened carefully, but the music inside had now stopped, and the man seemed unsure what to do. He looked around, but could see no one on the footpath behind him, and no other houses anywhere near.

At last he decided to knock on the door.

'Come in!' called Shepherd Fennel. All eyes turned towards the stranger, as he entered the warm room. He kept his hat on, low over his face. 'The rain is heavy, friends,' he said in a rich, deep voice. 'May I come in and rest here for a while?'

'O' course, stranger,' replied the shepherd. 'You've chosen your moment well, because we're having a party tonight. There's a new baby in the family, you see.'

'I hope you and your fine wife'll have many more, shepherd,' the man answered, smiling politely at Mrs Fennel. He looked quickly round the room, and seemed happy with what he saw. He took his hat off, and shook the water from his shoulders.

'Will you have a drink with us, stranger?' asked Fennel. He passed a mug of his wife's home-made mead to the newcomer, who drank deeply from it and held it out for more.

'I'll take a seat in the chimney corner, if you don't mind,' said the man, 'to dry my clothes a bit.' He moved closer to the fire, and began to look very much at home.

'There's only one more thing that I need to make me happy,' he added, 'and that's a little tobacco.'

'I'll fill your pipe,' said the shepherd kindly.

'Can you lend me one?'

'You're a smoker, and you've no pipe?' said Fennel.

'I dropped it somewhere on the road.' The man lit the pipe that Fennel gave him, and seemed to want to talk no more.

The second stranger

During this conversation the other visitors had not taken much notice of the stranger, because they were discussing what the fiddler should play next. They were just getting up to start another dance when there was a second knock at the door. At this sound, the stranger turned his back to the door, and seemed very busy trying to light his pipe.

'Come in!' called Shepherd Fennel a second time. In a moment another man entered. He too was a stranger.

This one was very different from the first. There was a more cheerful look about him. He was several years older, with greying hair and a full, reddish face. Under his long wet coat he was wearing a dark grey suit.

'I must ask to rest here for a few minutes, friends,' he said, 'or I shall be wet to the skin before I reach Casterbridge.'

'Make yourself at home, sir,' replied Fennel, a little less warmly than when welcoming the first stranger. The cottage was not large, there were not many chairs, and these newcomers brought cold, wet air into the room.

The second visitor took off his coat and hat, and sat down heavily at the table, which the dancers had pushed into the chimney corner. He found himself sitting next to the first stranger, who smiled politely at him and passed him the mug of mead. The second man took it, lifted it to his mouth, and drank without stopping, watched by Mrs Fennel, who was not pleased at this free drinking of her best mead.

At last the man in the grey suit put down the mug with a happy sigh. 'That's wonderful mead, shepherd!' he said. 'I haven't tasted anything as good as that for many years.'

'I'm pleased you enjoy it, sir!' replied Shepherd Fennel.

'It's goodish mead,' agreed his wife, a little coldly. 'Made from our own honey, o' course, and it is trouble enough to make, I can tell ye. But we may not make any more – honey sells well, and we don't need much mead for ourselves.'

'Oh, but you can't stop making this!' cried the man in grey. He took the mug again and drank the last drop. 'I love mead, as much as I love going to church on Sundays, or giving money to the poor!'



'That's wonderful mead!' said the man in the grey suit.

'Ha, ha, ha!' said the man by the fire, who seemed to enjoy the stranger's little joke.

The old mead of those days, made with the best honey and the freshest eggs, tasted very strong, but it did not taste as strong as it actually was. Before long, the stranger in grey became very cheerful and red in the face. He made himself comfortable in his chair, and continued the conversation.

'Well, as I say, I'm on my way to Casterbridge,' he said.

'You don't live there then?' said Shepherd Fennel.

'Not yet, although I plan to move there soon.'

'Going to start a business, perhaps?' asked the shepherd.

'No, no,' said his wife. 'It is easy to see that the gentleman is rich, and doesn't need to work at anything.'

'Rich is not the word for me, madam,' replied the man in grey. 'I have to work, and I do work. And even if I only get to Casterbridge by midnight tonight, I must begin work there at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Yes, hot or cold, rain or snow, I must do my day's work tomorrow.'

'Poor man! So, although you look rich and comfortable, your life is harder than ours, is it?' said the shepherd's wife.

'Well, it's the work that I have to do, that's all. Now I must leave you, friends. But before I go, there's time for one more drink to your baby's health. Only, the mug is empty.'

'Here's some small mead, sir,' offered Mrs Fennel. 'We call it small, but it's still made from good honey.'

'No,' said the stranger. 'I prefer to remember the taste of your best mead, thank you.'

'Of course you do,' said Shepherd Fennel quickly. He went to the dark place under the stairs where the best mead was kept, and filled the mug. His wife followed him and spoke worriedly to him in a low voice.

'I don't like the look o' the man at all! He's drunk enough for ten men already! Don't give him any more o' the best!'

'But he's in our house, my love, and 'tis a miserable wet night. What's a mug of mead more or less?'

'Very well, just this time then,' she said, looking sadly at the mead. 'But who is he, and what kind of work does he do?'

'I don't know. I'll ask him again.'

While the man in grey drank his mead, Fennel asked him again about his work, but the man did not reply at once. Suddenly the first stranger spoke from his seat by the fire.

'Anybody may know what I do – I work with wheels.'

'And anybody may know what *I* do,' said the man in the grey suit, 'if they're clever enough to find it out.'

There was a short silence, which the shepherd's wife broke by calling for a song. The second mug of mead had made the stranger's face even redder and more cheerful than before, and he offered to sing the first song. This is what he sang:

My job is the strangest one,

Honest shepherds all
Work that all the world can see;

My customers I tie, and I take them up so high,

And send 'em to a far country!

No one spoke, except the man near the fire, who joined in the last part, with a deep, musical voice:

And send 'em to a far country!

None of the people in the room understood what the singer meant, except the man near the fire, who continued smoking, and said calmly, 'Go on, stranger! Sing on!'

The man in grey drank again from his mug, and sang:

There isn't much I need, Honest shepherds all - To set the criminals free.

A little piece of rope, and a tall hanging post,

And that'll be enough for me!

Now it was clear to everybody in the room that the stranger was answering the shepherd's question in song. They all looked at him, their eyes and mouths wide open in horror.



Everyone looked at the stranger, their eyes and mouths wide open in horror.

'Oh, he's the hangman!' they whispered to each other. 'He's come to hang that poor clockmaker tomorrow in Casterbridge prison – the clockmaker who had no work, and whose children had no food, so he stole a sheep, and now he's going to hang for it!'

The third stranger

Just then, there was another knock on the door. People seemed frightened, and Shepherd Fennel was slow to call out, for the third time, the welcoming words, 'Come in!'

The door was gently opened, and another stranger stood in the doorway. He was a little man, with fair hair, and was tidily dressed. 'Can you tell me the way to—?' he began, but stopped speaking when his eyes fell on the stranger in grey, who, at that moment, started singing again.

Tomorrow is my working day,

Honest shepherds all -

Working with the little piece of rope.

A sheep has lost its life, and the thief must pay the price.

He'll find some peace with God, we hope!

The man by the fire repeated cheerfully in his deep voice:

He'll find some peace with God, we hope!

All this time the third stranger had stood in the doorway, and now everyone turned to look at him. They saw to their surprise that his face was white, his hands were shaking, and his eyes were fixed in horror on the man in grey. A moment later he turned, and ran away into the darkness and the rain.

'Who can that be?' asked Shepherd Fennel.

No one answered. The room was silent, although there were more than twenty people in it, and nothing could be heard except the rain beating on the windows.

The stillness was broken by a bang. It was the sound of a gun, and it came from Casterbridge.



The third stranger ran away into the darkness and the rain.

'What does that mean?' cried several people at once.

'A prisoner's escaped from Casterbridge prison – that's what it means,' replied the man in grey, jumping up from his chair. 'I wonder if it's my man?'

'It must be!' said the shepherd. 'And I think we've seen him! The little man who looked in at the door just now, and shook like a leaf when he saw ye and heard your song!'

'His face was as white as a sheet,' said the fiddler.

'His hands shook like an old man's,' said a farm worker.

'His heart seemed as heavy as a stone,' said Mrs Fennel.

'True,' said the man by the fire. 'His face was white, his hands shook, and he ran like the wind – it's all true.'

'We were all wondering what made him run off like that,' said one of the women, 'and now 'tis explained.'

'Is there a policeman here?' asked the hangman.

One of the men came slowly forward, pushed by his friends. 'I'm one o' the king's officers, sir,' he said.

'Then take some of these men at once, follow the criminal, and bring him back here. He hasn't gone far, I'm sure.'

'I will, sir, I will, when I've got my uniform. I'll go home and put it on, and come back here immediately!'

'Uniform! Never mind about your uniform! The man'll be far away by that time!'

'But I must have my uniform! There's the king's name on it in gold – I can't arrest a man without my uniform on.'

'I'm a king's man myself,' said the man in grey coldly, 'and I order you to find and arrest this man at once! Now then, all the men in the house must come with us. Are you ready?'

The men left the cottage to start their search, and the women ran upstairs to see the new baby, who had begun to cry loudly. But the living room did not stay empty for long. A few minutes later the first stranger came quietly back into the house. He cut himself a large piece of cake, and drank another mug of mead. He was still eating when another man came in just as quietly. It was the man in grey.

'Oh, you here?' said the hangman, smiling. 'I thought you had gone to help look for the prisoner.'

'And I thought you had gone too,' replied the other.

'Well, I felt that there were enough people without me,' said the man in grey, helping himself to the mead.

'I felt the same as you.'

'These shepherd-people can easily find the man because they know this hilly country. They'll have him ready for me by the morning, and it'll be no trouble to me at all.'

'Yes, they'll find him. We'll save ourselves all that trouble.'

'True, true. Well, I'm going to Casterbridge. Are you going the same way? We could walk together.'

'No, I'm sorry to say I'm going the other way.' And after finishing their mead, the two men shook hands warmly, said goodbye to each other, and went their different ways.

Out on the hills, the shepherd and his friends were getting cold and wet in their search for the prisoner. They had no luck at all until they reached the top of a hill, where a single tree stood. Suddenly they saw the man who they were looking for, standing next to the tree.

'Your money or your life!' cried the policeman loudly.



Suddenly they saw the man they were looking for.

'No, no,' whispered the shepherd. 'That's what robbers say, not good, honest people like us!'

'Well, I must say something, mustn't I? Ye don't realize how difficult it is to remember what to say!'

The little man now seemed to notice them for the first time. 'Well, travellers, did I hear ye speak to me?' he asked. 'You did,' replied the policeman. 'We arrest ye for not waiting in Casterbridge prison for your hanging tomorrow!'

The little man did not seem at all afraid, and to everyone's surprise agreed with great politeness to go back to the shepherd's cottage. When they arrived there, they discovered that two officers from Casterbridge prison, and a judge who lived nearby, were waiting for them.

'Gentlemen,' said the policeman, 'I've brought back your prisoner – here he is!'

'But this is not our man!' cried one of the prison officers.

'What?' said the judge. 'Haven't you got the right man?'

'But then who can this man be?' asked the policeman.

'I don't know,' said the prison officer. 'But our prisoner is very different. He's tall and thin, with a deep, musical voice.'

'That was the stranger who sat by the fire!' cried Fennel.

The little man now spoke to the judge for the first time. 'Sir,' he said, 'I must explain. I've done nothing wrong — my only crime is that the prisoner is my brother. Today I was on my way to visit him in Casterbridge prison for the last time, when I got lost in the dark. I stopped here to ask the way, and when I opened the door, I saw my brother sitting by the fire. Right next to him was the hangman who'd come to take his life! My brother looked at me, and I knew he meant, "Don't tell them who I am, or I'll die!" I was too frightened to do anything except turn and run away.'

'And do you know where your brother is now?'

'No, sir. I haven't seen him since I left the cottage.'

'And what's his job?'

'He's a clockmaker, sir.'

'He said he worked with wheels,' said Shepherd Fennel. 'He meant the wheels of clocks and watches, I suppose.'

'Well, we must let this poor man go,' said the judge. 'Clearly, it's his brother who is the wanted man.'

And so the little man left the cottage with a sad, slow step.

The next morning, men were out on the hills again, searching for the clever thief. But the shepherds and farm workers did not look very carefully. They did not think the man should hang, just for stealing a sheep, and they liked the wonderful coolness that he showed, when sitting next to the hangman at the shepherd's party. So the prisoner was never found, and the man in grey never did his morning's work in Casterbridge, nor ever met again the friendly stranger who had sung the hangman's song with him by the shepherd's fire.

The grass has long been green on the graves of Shepherd Fennel and his wife, and the baby whose health was drunk that night is now an old lady. But the arrival of the three strangers at the shepherd's cottage, and all that happened afterwards, is a story as well known as ever in the hills and valleys around Casterbridge.

What the Shepherd Saw

A Story of Four Moonlight Nights

1 First night

The Christmas moon was showing her cold face to the low hills called the Marlbury Downs, in the south-western part of England known as Mid-Wessex. Here sheep were kept out on the hills all year round, and lambs were born as early as December. Shepherds needed to be on the hills day and night at this time of year, and often used small wheeled huts where they could rest and keep warm, while keeping a careful eye on the sheep.

On a high piece of land one of these huts stood inside a little circle of trees, which kept it out of the icy wind and also hidden from any passers-by. The hut was made of wood, and had a door and two windows. The north one looked out on the eight hundred sheep which were in the shepherd's care, and the south window gave a view of three ancient stones, built in the shape of a doorway. These great stones, which village people called the Devil's Door, had been there for over two thousand years. They were worn and weather-beaten, but tonight looked almost new in the silver light of

the moon.

Inside the hut a young shepherd boy was waiting for his master, who entered at that moment.

'Are ye sleepy?' asked the old man crossly.

'N-no, master,' replied the boy, who was a little frightened of the shepherd and his heavy stick.

'The sheep should be all right until the morning now,' said the shepherd, 'but one of us must stay here, so I'll leave ye, do ye hear? I'll go home and sleep for a few hours. Run down to my cottage and fetch me if anything happens. Ye can have a bit of a sleep in the chair by the stove – but only for a few minutes, mind! Make sure ye stay awake the rest of the time, and don't let that fire go out!'

The old man closed the door, and disappeared. The boy went out to check on the sheep and new-born lambs, then came back into the hut and sat down by the warm stove. Soon his eyes closed, his head dropped, and he was asleep.

When he woke up, he could hear down in the valley the clock at Shakeforest Towers striking eleven. The sound carried well in the cold night air. He looked out of the north window and saw the sheep, lying on the grass as quietly as before. He next looked out of the opposite window, towards the stones of the Devil's Door, white and ghostly in the moonlight. And in front of them stood a man.

It was clear that he was not a farm worker, because he was wearing a dark suit, and carried himself like a gentleman. The boy was still wondering, in great surprise, why the man was visiting the Devil's Door at this hour, when suddenly another figure appeared. This second figure was a woman, and when the stranger saw her, he hurried towards her. He met her near the trees, and took her into his arms.

'You have come, Harriet! Thank you!' he cried warmly.

'But not for this,' replied the lady, pulling away from him. She added more kindly, 'I have come, Fred, because you begged me! Why did you ask to see me?'

'Harriet, I have seen many lands and faces since I last walked these hills, but I have only thought of you.'

'Was it only to tell me this that you begged me to meet you, out here on the hills, so late at night?'

'Harriet, be honest with me! I have heard that the Duke is unkind to you.'



'Why did you ask to see me?' Harriet said.

'He sometimes gets angry, but he is a good husband.'

'Harriet, dearest, is that really true? Doesn't everybody know that your life with him is a sad one? I have come to find out what I can do. You are a Duchess, and I'm only Fred Ogbourne, but it's still possible that I can help you. By God! The sweetness of your voice should keep him pleasant, especially when the sweetness of your face is added to it!'

'Captain Ogbourne!' she cried, half afraid, half playful.
'You're an old friend – how can you speak to me in this way?
Remember I'm a married woman! I was wrong to come, I see that now.'

'You call me Captain Ogbourne,' he replied unhappily, 'but I was always Fred to you before. I think you no longer have any feeling for me. My love for you, Harriet, has not changed at all, but you are a different woman now. I must accept it. I can never see you again.'

'You needn't talk like that, you stupid man. You can see me again – why not? But of course, not like this. It was a mistake of mine to come tonight, and I only did it because the Duke is away at the moment.'

'When does he return?'

'The day after tomorrow, or the day after that.'

'Then meet me again tomorrow night.'

'No, Fred, I cannot.'

'If you cannot tomorrow night, you can the night after. Please let me have *one* more meeting before he returns, to say goodbye! Now, promise me!' He took the Duchess's hand.

'No, Fred, let go of my hand! It's not kind of you to make me feel sorry for you, and then to keep me here like this!'

'But see me once more! I have come two thousand miles to see you.'

'Oh, I must not! People will talk. Don't ask it of me!'

'Then confess two things to me; that you did love me once, and that your husband is unkind to you often enough to make you think of the time when you loved me.'

'Yes, I confess them both,' she answered quietly.

'Come once more!' He still held her hand, and had his arm around her waist.

'Very well, then,' she said finally. 'I agree. I'll meet you

tomorrow night or the night after. Now let me go.'

He set her free, and watched her hurry down the hill towards her home, Shakeforest Towers. Then he turned and walked away. In a few minutes all was silent and empty again.

But only for a moment. Suddenly, a third figure appeared, from behind the stones. He was a man of heavier build than the Captain, and was wearing riding boots. It was clear that he had watched the meeting between the Captain and the Duchess. He had been too far away to hear their conversation and the lady's reluctant words, so to him they had the appearance of lovers. But several more years passed before the boy was old enough to understand this.

This third figure stood still for a moment, thinking. Then he went back into the trees, and came out again with his horse. He rode off, and the sound of the horse's feet on the hard ground was heard for several minutes, until it died away.

The boy stayed in the hut, his eyes still on the stones, but nobody else appeared there. Suddenly he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, which made him jump.



Suddenly, a third figure appeared, from behind the stones.

'Now look here, young Bill Mills, ye've let the fire in the stove go out! Well, what's happened, ye bad boy?'

'Nothing, master.'

'Sheep and lambs all safe and well?'

'Yes, master.'

The old shepherd spoke angrily. 'Well, that's where ye're wrong. There are two new lambs out there, born just this minute, and one of the mothers is half dead! I told ye to stay awake, boy, and fetch me if I was needed! Well, what have you got to say for yourself?'

'You said that I could have a bit of a sleep! In the chair by the stove, you said!'

'Don't you speak to your elders and betters like that, young man, or you'll end up hanging from a rope at the prison! Well, ye can go home now, and come back again by breakfast time. I'm an old man, but there's no rest for me!'

The old shepherd then lay down inside the hut, and the boy went down the hill to his home in the village.

Second night

The next evening the old shepherd left the boy alone in the hut again, with repeated orders to keep a careful eye on the sheep. But young Bill was only interested in the view from the south window. He watched and waited, while the moonlight shone on the ancient stones, but neither Captain nor Duchess appeared.

When he heard the Shakeforest Towers clock strike eleven, he saw the third figure appear. As the man came towards the hut, the moonlight shone full on his face, and the boy realized in horror that it was the Duke. All the villagers lived in fear of the Duke. He owned every farm and every house for miles around, and anybody who made him angry could lose their home and their job in a moment. The boy closed the stove, and quickly hid himself in a corner of the hut.

The Duke came close to the place where his wife and the Captain had stood the night before. He looked around, perhaps for a hiding-place. When he discovered the hut among the trees, he entered, and stood at the south window, looking out at the Devil's Door.

Only a minute or two later the Captain arrived, to wait for the Duchess. But a terrible surprise was waiting for him tonight, as well as for the frightened boy hidden in the hut. At the Captain's appearance, the Duke became very angry. He opened the door of the hut and stepped out.

'You have dishonoured her, and for that you shall die!' he cried. In the hut, the boy left his hiding-place and ran to the window. He could not see the two men, but he heard something falling on the grass, and then silence.

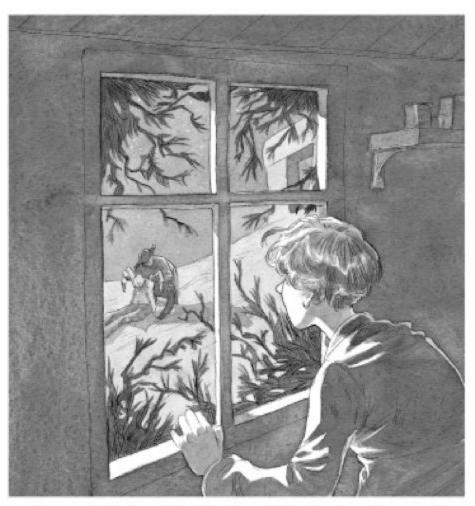
Three minutes later he saw the Duke going up the hill towards the stones, pulling the Captain's body along the ground. The boy knew that behind the Devil's Door there was a deep hole, covered by long grass and other plants. The Duke made his way slowly to the shadows behind the stones, and when he came out, he was pulling nothing behind him.

'Now for the second!' the boy heard him say. This time the Duke waited outside the hut. It was clear that he expected his wife, the Duchess, to arrive next at the meeting-place.

Inside the hut young Bill shook with fear. 'What will he do if she comes?' he thought. 'Will he kill her too? He looks angry enough! And he can do what he likes – he's the Duke. Nobody can stop him!'

The jealous watcher waited for some time, but she never came. Sometimes he looked at his watch in surprise. He seemed almost disappointed that she did not appear. At half-past eleven he turned away to find his horse, and rode slowly down the hill.

The young boy thought of what lay in the hole behind the stones, and was too frightened to stay alone in the hut. He preferred to be with someone who was alive, even the Duke, than with someone who was dead, so he ran after the horseman. He followed the Duke all the way down into the valley, feeling more comfortable when the lonely hills were left behind him. Soon he could see the high walls and roofs of the Duke's home, Shakeforest Towers.



He saw the Duke pulling the Captain's body along the ground.

When the Duke got close to the great house, a small door in a side wall opened, and a woman came out. She ran into the moonlight to meet the Duke.

'Ah, my dear, is it you?' she said. 'I heard your horse's step on the road, and knew it must be you.' 'Happy to see me, are you?'

'How can you ask that?'

'Well, it is a lovely night for meetings.'

'Yes, it is a lovely night.'

The Duke got down from his horse and stood by her side. 'Why were you listening for me at this time of night?' he asked.

'There is a strange story, which I must tell you at once. But why did you come a night sooner than you said? I am sorry, I really am!' (shaking her head playfully), 'because I had ordered a special dinner for your arrival tomorrow, and now it won't be a surprise at all.'

The Duke did not look at his wife. 'What is this strange story that you wish to tell me?' he asked quietly.

'It is this. You know my cousin Fred Ogbourne? We used to play together when we were children, and he – well, he loved me, I think. I told you about it, you know.'

'You have never told me of it before.'



'Ah, my dear, is it you?' the woman said.

'Oh, then it was your sister – yes, I told *her* about it. Well, I haven't seen him for many years, and of course I'd forgotten all about his feeling for me. So I was surprised to receive a letter from him yesterday. I can remember what he wrote.

'My dear cousin Harriet, the letter said. If my life and future mean anything to you at all, I beg you to do what I ask. Meet me at eleven o'clock, tonight by the ancient stones on Marlbury Downs. I cannot say more, except to beg you to come. I will explain everything when I see you. Come alone. You have all my happiness in your hands. Yours, Fred

'That was his letter. *Now* I realize that it was a mistake to go, but at the time I only thought he must be in trouble, and with not a friend in the world to help him. So I went to Marlbury Downs at eleven o'clock. Wasn't it brave of me?'

'Very,' replied the Duke coldly.

'When I got there, I saw he was no longer the boy that I

remembered, but a full-grown man and an officer. I was sorry I had come. What he wanted, I don't know – perhaps just a meeting with me. He held me by the hand and waist, and refused to let me go until I promised to meet him again. And in the end I did, because he spoke very warmly to me and I was afraid of him in that lonely place. Then I escaped – I ran home – and that's all. Of course, I never meant to meet him there again. But this evening I thought, "Perhaps he'll come to the house when he realizes I'm not coming to meet him," and that's why I couldn't sleep. But you are so silent!'

'I have had a long journey.'

They moved on towards the front entrance of the house. 'I have thought of something, but perhaps you won't like it,' she said. 'I think he will wait there again tomorrow night. Shall we go to the hill tomorrow together – just to see if he is there? And tell him he must not try to meet me like this?'

'Why should we see if he is there?' asked her unsmiling husband.

'Because I think we should try to help him. Poor Fred! He will listen to you, if you talk to him. It is wrong of him to think of me in that way, but he is clearly very miserable.'

By this time they had reached the front entrance and rung the bell. A man came to take the horse away, and the Duke and Duchess entered the house.

Third night

The next night Bill Mills was left alone again to take care of the sheep. He tried bravely not to think of what lay behind the Devil's Door, but without much success. So he was almost pleased as well as surprised when the Duke and Duchess appeared near the hut at about eleven o'clock. He watched and listened through the little window in his hut.

'I tell you, he did not think it was worth coming again!' the Duke said, reluctant to walk further. 'He is not here, so turn round and come home.'

'He doesn't seem to be here, it's true. Perhaps something has happened to him? Oh poor Fred! I do hope he is all right!'

The Duke said quickly, 'Oh, he probably has some other meeting to go to.'

'I don't think so.'

'Or perhaps he has found it too far to come.'

'Nor is that probable.'

'Then perhaps he thought it was better not to come.'

'Yes, perhaps. Or he may be here all the time, hiding behind the Devil's Door. Let's go and see – and surprise him!'

'Oh, he's not there.'

'Perhaps he's lying very quietly in the grass there, because of you,' she said, smiling.

'Oh, no - not because of me!'

'Come, then. Dearest, you're as reluctant as a schoolboy tonight! I know you're jealous of poor Fred, but you have no reason to be!'

'I'll come! I'll come! Say no more, Harriet!' And together they crossed the grass towards the stones.

The boy came out of the hut to see what happened next, but the Duchess saw him moving in the darkness.

'Ah, I see him at last!' she said.

'See him!' cried the Duke. 'Where?'

'By the Devil's Door. Don't you see him?' She laughed. 'Ah, my poor lover-cousin, you'll be in trouble now!'

'It's not him!' said the Duke in horror. 'It can't be him!'

'No, it isn't. It's too small for him. It's a boy.'

'Ah, I thought so! Boy, come here.'

Fearfully, young Bill came closer.

'What are you doing here?' asked the Duke.

'Taking care of the sheep, your Grace.'

'Ah, you know me! Do you keep sheep here every night?'

'Most nights in winter, your Grace.'

'And what have you seen here tonight or last night?' asked the Duchess. 'Anyone waiting or walking about?'

The boy was silent.

'He has seen nothing,' said her husband quickly, staring angrily at the boy. 'Come, let us go. The air is cold.'

When they had gone, young Bill went back to the sheep. But he was not alone for long. Half an hour later the Duke's heavy steps were heard again. His wife was not with him.

'Listen, boy,' he said. 'The Duchess asked you a question, and I want you to answer it. Have you seen anything strange these nights, when you've been watching your sheep?'

'Your Grace, I'm just a poor, stupid boy, and what I see, I don't remember.'

'I ask you again,' said the Duke, holding the boy's shoulder with a strong hand and staring down into his frightened face. 'Did you see anything strange here last night?'

'Oh, your Grace, don't kill me!' cried the boy, falling to the ground. 'I've never seen you walking here, or riding here, or waiting for a man, or pulling a dead body along!'

'Ah!' said the Duke coldly. 'It is good to know that you have never seen those things. Now, which do you prefer – to see me do those things now, or to keep a secret all your life?'

'Keep a secret, your Grace!'

'You are sure you can do it?'

'Oh, try me, your Grace!'

'Very well. And now, do you like being a shepherd?'

'Not at all. 'Tis lonely work for a boy like me, who sees ghosts everywhere. And my master sometimes beats me.'

'I'll give you new clothes, and send you to school, and

make a man of you. But you must never say you've been a shepherd boy. The moment that you forget yourself, and speak of what you've seen on the hills – this year, next year, or twenty years from now – I will stop helping you, and you'll come down to being a poor shepherd again.'

'I'll never speak of it, your Grace!'

'Come here.' The Duke took the boy to the Devil's Door.

'Now make a promise in front of these ancient stones. The ghosts that live in this place will find you and punish you if you ever speak of your life as a shepherd boy or what you saw then. Promise to keep this secret!'



'Oh, your Grace, don't kill me!' cried the boy.

His face as white as a sheet, the boy promised.

Then they went down into the valley, the Duke holding the boy's hand. That night the boy slept at Shakeforest Towers, and the next day he was sent away to school.

Fourth night

On a winter evening many years later, a well-dressed man of business sat in his office at Shakeforest Towers. He had come a long way from the shepherd boy that he once was, but he did not seem happy with his comfortable life. He appeared older than his age, and he looked about him restlessly.

He stood up and left the office, and went to a room in another part of the house, where he knocked, and entered. The Duchess had been dead for some years, and the Duke was now a thin old man with white hair.

'Oh - Mills?' he said. 'Sit down. What is it?'

'Old times have come to life again, your Grace.'

'Which old times are they?'

'That Christmas week twenty-two years ago, when the Duchess's cousin asked her to meet him on Marlbury Downs. I saw the meeting, and I saw much more than that.'

'Do you remember a promise made by a shepherd boy?'

'I do. That boy has kept the promise all his life.'

'Then I wish to hear no more about it.'

'Very well. But the secret may soon come out. Not from me, because I'm grateful for what you've done for me. There was great excitement when Captain Ogbourne disappeared, but I spoke not a word, and his body was never found. For twenty-two years I've wondered what you did with him. Now I know. This afternoon I went up on the hill, and did some digging. I saw enough to know that something still lies there in a hole behind the stones.'

'Mills, do you think the Duchess guessed?'

'She never did, I'm sure, to the day of her death.'

'What made you think of going there this afternoon?'

'Something that happened today, your Grace. The oldest man in the village has died – the old shepherd.'

'Dead at last - how old was he?'

'Ninety-four.'

'And I'm only seventy. I have twenty-four more years!'

'He was my master when I was a shepherd boy, your Grace. And he was on the hill the second night. He was there all the time, but none of us knew that.'

'Ah!' said the Duke, looking fixedly at Mills. 'Go on!'

'When I heard he was dying, it made me think of the past, and that's why I went up on the hills. Now the villagers are saying that before he died, he confessed a secret to the vicar – a secret that he'd kept for your Grace, about a crime on Marlbury Downs more than twenty years ago.'

'That's enough, Mills. I'll see the vicar early tomorrow.'

'What will you do, your Grace?'

'Stop his tongue for twenty-four years, until I am dead at ninety-four, like the old shepherd. Go home now, Mills.' Mills left the room and walked to his own house, where he lived a lonely, friendless life. But he could not sleep, and at midnight he looked out at the colourless moon, and decided to walk up to Marlbury Downs again. Once on the hill, he placed himself where the shepherd's hut had stood. No sheep or lambs were there that winter, but the Devil's Door stood high and white as ever, with dark shadows behind it.



The Duke went to the covered hole, and dug with his hands like an animal.

Suddenly he realized he was not alone. A figure in white was moving silently towards the stones. It was the Duke himself, in his long nightshirt, walking in his sleep. He went straight to the covered hole, and dug with his hands like an animal. Then he got up, sighed, and went back down the hill. Mills followed him and saw him enter Shakeforest Towers.

The next morning, when Mills arrived at the great house, the housekeeper came to the door to meet him.

'Oh, sir,' she said, 'the Duke is dead! He left his room in the night and went walking around somewhere. And on his way back to his room, he fell downstairs and broke his neck.'

* * *

At last Mills was able to tell the secret that had lain so heavily on his heart for twenty-two years, and he died, at peace with himself, a few years later.

There are still fine sheep and lambs on the Marlbury Downs, but shepherds do not like spending the nights close to the Devil's Door. They say that during Christmas week ghostly white shapes are often seen there. Something made of bright metal shines in the moonlight, and there is the shadow of a man pulling something heavy across the grass. But no one can be sure that these things are true.

A Moment of Madness

1

A wedding is arranged

Most people who knew Baptista Trewthen agreed that there was nothing in her to love, and nothing in her to hate. She did not seem to feel very strongly about anything. But still waters run deep, and nothing had yet happened to make her show what lay hidden inside her, like gold underground.

Since her birth she had lived on St Maria's, an island off the south-west coast of England. Her father, a farmer, had spent a lot of money on sending her to school on the mainland. At nineteen she studied at a training college for teachers, and at twenty-one she found a teaching job in a town called Tor-upon-Sea, on the mainland coast.

Baptista taught the children as well as she could, but after a year had passed she seemed worried about something. Mrs Wace, her landlady, noticed the change in the young woman and asked her what the matter was.

'It has nothing to do with the town, or you,' replied Miss Trewthen. She seemed reluctant to say more.

'Then is it the pay?'

'No, it isn't the pay.'

to do, Mrs Wace. I like him better than teaching, but I don't like him enough to marry him.'

These conversations were continued from day to day, until at last the landlady decided to agree with Baptista's parents.

'Life will be much easier for you, my dear,' she told her young friend, 'if you marry this rich neighbour.'

In April Baptista went home to St Maria's for a short holiday, and when she returned, she seemed calmer.

'I have agreed to have him as my husband, so that's the end of it,' she told Mrs Wace.

In the next few months letters passed between Baptista and Mr Heddegan, but the girl preferred not to discuss her engagement with Mrs Wace. Later, she told her that she was leaving her job at the end of July, and the wedding was arranged for the first Wednesday in August.

A chance meeting

When the end of July arrived, Baptista was in no hurry to return home to the island. She was not planning to buy any special clothes for the wedding, and her parents were making all the other arrangements. So she did not leave Tor-upon-Sea until the Saturday before her wedding. She travelled by train to the town of Pen-zephyr, but when she arrived, she found that the boat to St Maria's had left early, and there was no other boat until Tuesday. 'I'll have to stay here until then,' she thought. 'It's too far to go back to Mrs Wace's.' She did not seem to mind this – in fact, she was almost happy to wait another three nights before seeing her future husband.

She found a room in a small hotel, took her luggage there, then went out for a walk round the town.



'Oh, is it really you, Charles?' Baptista said.

'Baptista? Yes, Baptista it is!'

The words came from behind her. Turning round, she gave a jump, and stared. 'Oh, is it really you, Charles?' she said.

With a half-smile the newcomer looked her up and down. He appeared almost angry with her, but he said nothing.

'I'm going home,' she continued, 'but I've missed the boat.'

He did not seem interested in this news. 'Still teaching?' he said. 'What a fine teacher you make, Baptista, I'm sure!'

She knew that was not his real meaning. 'I know I'm not very good at teaching,' she replied. 'That's why I've stopped.'

'Oh, you've stopped? You surprise me.'

'I hate teaching.'

to make an honest engagement of it.'

'That's just it! You girls expect a man to talk about marrying after the first look! But I did mean to get engaged to you, you know.'

'But you never said so, and a woman can't wait for ever!'

'Baptista, I promise you that I was planning to ask you to marry me in six months' time.'

She appeared very uncomfortable, and they walked along in silence. Soon he said, 'Did you want to marry me then?'

And she whispered sadly back, 'Yes!'

As they walked on, away from the town and into the fields, her shoulder and his were close together. He held her arm with a strong hand. This seemed to say, 'Now I hold you, and you must do what I want.'

'How strange that we should meet like this!' said the young man. 'You and I could be husband and wife, going on our honeymoon together. But instead of that, we'll say goodbye in half an hour, perhaps for ever. Yes, life is strange!'

She stopped walking. 'I must go back. This is too painful, Charley! You're not being kind today.'

'I don't want to hurt you – you know I don't,' he answered more gently. 'But it makes me angry – what you're going to do. I don't think you should marry him.'

'I must do it, now that I've agreed.'

'Why?' he asked, speaking more seriously now. 'It's never too late to stop a wedding if you're not happy with it. Now –



'You could marry me, instead of him,' said Charles.

Baptista gets married

That same afternoon Charles Stow and Baptista Trewthen travelled by train to the town of Trufal. Charles was, surprisingly, very careful of appearances, and found a room for Baptista in a different house from where he was staying. On Sunday they went to church and then walked around the town, on Monday Charles made the arrangements, and by nine o'clock on Tuesday morning they were husband and wife.

For the first time in her life Baptista had gone against her parents' wishes. She went cold with fear when she thought of their first meeting with her new husband. But she felt she had to tell them as soon as possible, and now the most important thing was to get home to St Maria's. So, in a great hurry, they packed their bags and caught the train to Penzephyr.

They arrived two hours before the boat left, so to pass the time they decided to walk along the cliffs a little way. It was a hot summer day, and Charles wanted to have a swim in the sea. Baptista did not like the idea of sitting alone while he swam. 'But I'll only be a quarter of an hour,' Charles said, and Baptista passively accepted this.

She sat high up on the cliffs, and watched him go down a footpath, disappear, appear again, and run across the beach to the sea. She watched him for a moment, then stared out to sea, thinking about her family. They were probably not worried about her, because she had sometimes missed the boat before, but they were expecting her to arrive today – and to marry David Heddegan tomorrow. 'How angry father will be!' she thought miserably. 'And mother will say I've made a terrible mistake! I almost wish I hadn't married Charles, in that moment of madness! Oh dear, what have I done!'

This made her think of her new husband, and she turned to look for him. He did not appear to be in the sea any more, and she could not see him on the beach. By this time she was frightened, and she climbed down the path as quickly as her shaking legs could manage. On the beach she called two men to help her, but they said they could see nothing at all in the water. Soon she found the place where Charles had left his clothes, but by now the sea had carried them away.

For a few minutes she stood there without moving. There was only one way to explain this sudden disappearance – her husband had drowned. And as she stood there, it began to seem like a terrible dream, and the last three days of her life with Charles seemed to disappear. She even had difficulty in remembering his face. 'How unexpected it was, meeting him that day!' she thought. 'And the wedding – did I really agree to it? Are we really married? It all happened so fast!'

She began to cry, still standing there on the beach. She did

not know what to do, or even what to think. Finally, she remembered the boat, and catching the boat home seemed the easiest thing to do. So she walked to the station, arranged for someone to carry her luggage, and went down to the boat. She did all this automatically, in a kind of dream.

Just before the boat left, she heard part of a conversation which made her sure that Charles was dead. One passenger said to another, 'A man drowned here earlier today, you know. He swam out too far, they say. A stranger, I think. Some people in a boat saw him, but they couldn't get to him in time.'

The boat was a long way out to sea before Baptista realized that Mr Heddegan was on the boat with her. She saw him walking towards her and quickly took the wedding ring off her left hand.

'I'm sorry,' said the landlady, 'there's a gentleman in that room.' Then, seeing Heddegan's disappointed face, and not wishing to lose a customer, she added quickly, 'But perhaps the gentleman will agree to move to another room, and then you can have the one that you want.'

'Well, if he doesn't want a view ...' said Mr Heddegan.

'Oh no, I'm sure he doesn't. And if you don't mind going for a little walk, I'll have the room ready when you return.'

During their walk, Baptista was careful to choose different streets from those that she had walked down with Charles, and her white face showed how difficult this visit was for her. At last they returned to the hotel, and were shown into the best bedroom. They sat at the window, drinking tea. Although Heddegan had arranged for a sea view, to please Baptista, she did not look out of the window once, but kept her eyes on the floor and walls of the room.

Suddenly she noticed a hat on the back of the door. It was just like the hat that Charles had worn. She stared harder; yes, it was the actual hat! She fell back in her chair.

Her husband jumped up, saying worriedly, 'You're not well! What can I get ye?'

'Smelling salts!' she said quickly, her voice shaking a little. 'From the shop near the station!'

He ran out of the room. Baptista rang the bell, and when a young girl came, whispered to her, 'That hat! Whose is it?'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I'll take it away,' said the girl hurriedly. She took the hat off the door. 'It belongs to the other gentleman.'

Secrets discovered

Mr and Mrs Heddegan both felt the honeymoon was not a success. They were happy to return to the island and start married life together in David Heddegan's large house. Baptista soon became as calm and passive as she had been before. She even smiled when neighbours called her Mrs Heddegan, and she began to enjoy the comfortable life that a rich husband could offer her. She did nothing at all to stop people finding out about her first marriage to Charles Stow, although there was always a danger of that happening.

One evening in September, when she was standing in her garden, a workman walked past along the road. He seemed to recognize her, and spoke to her in friendly surprise.

'What! Don't you know me?' he asked.

'I'm afraid I don't,' said Baptista.

'I was your witness, madam. I was mending the church window when you and your young man came to get married. Don't you remember? The vicar called me, to be a witness.'

Baptista looked quickly around. Heddegan was at the other end of the garden but unluckily, just at that moment, he turned and walked towards the house. 'Are you coming in, my dear?' he called out to Baptista. The workman stared at him. 'That's not your—' he began, then he saw Baptista's face and stopped. Baptista was unable to speak, and the workman began to realize that there was a little mystery here. 'I've been unlucky since then,' he continued, still staring at Baptista's white face. 'It's hard finding enough work to buy food for my wife and myself. Perhaps you could help me, because I once helped you?'

Baptista gave him some money, and hoped never to see him again. But he was cleverer than he looked. By asking questions on the island and the mainland, he soon realized that Baptista had married one man on Tuesday, and another man on Wednesday. He visited her again two days later.

'It was a mystery to me, madam!' he said, when she opened the door. 'But now I understand it all. I want to tell you, madam, that I'm not a man to make trouble between husband and wife. But I'm going back to the mainland again, and I need a little more money. If your old man finds out about your first husband, I'm sure he won't like it, will he?'