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THE THREE STRANGERS and Other Stories

Thomas Hardy is probably best known for his novels such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, but he also wrote a great number of short stories. Many of them were based on stories told by people in the villages around where he lived in the south of England.

People are the same, whether they live in the town or the country, today or a hundred years ago. From his hut a young shepherd boy watches, wide-eyed and afraid, a secret meeting between a woman and a man who is not her husband. A young teacher, going home to marry a much older man, has a moment of madness that will change her life.

But we begin with a knock on the door at a lonely cottage. Inside, all is bright and cheerful, with music and dancing, and people enjoying themselves. Outside, the rain beats down, and the stranger following the footpath across the wild hills stares at the lighted windows. Should he go on, or can he stop for a while, to find rest and food and a seat by a warm fire?

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THOMAS HARDY

The Three Strangers

and Other Stories

Retold by
Clare West

Illustrated by
Adam Stower



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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

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Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

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Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published in Oxford Bookworms 2003

The story entitled *A Moment of Madness* was published in its
original version under the title *A Mere Interlude*

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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ISBN 978 0 19 479133 5

Printed in Hong Kong

Word count (main text): 11,680 words

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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

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The Three Strangers and Other Stories

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

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The Three Strangers

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.

2

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

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The Three Strangers and Other Stories

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

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The Three Strangers

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.

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The Three Strangers and Other Stories

‘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

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The Three Strangers

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!

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The Three Strangers and Other Stories

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.*

YOU HAVE REACHED THE END OF THE SAMPLE.

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