

The Three Strangers

by Thomas Hardy

(Adapted book. Pre-Intermediate level)

CHAPTER ONE

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.

CHAPTER TWO

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!'

'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.

'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!

CHAPTER THREE

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.

'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 Caster bridge. 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.

'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.

- THE END -

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