

A Moment of Madness

by Thomas Hardy

(Adapted book. Pre-Intermediate level)

CHAPTER ONE

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.'

'Is it something that you've heard from home, my dear?'

Baptista was silent for a few moments. Then she said, 'It's Mr Heddegan - David Heddegan. He's an old neighbour of ours on St Maria's, with no wife or family at all. When I was a child, he used to say he wanted to marry me one day. Now I'm a woman, it's no longer a joke, and he really wishes to do it. And my parents say I can't do better than have him.'

'Has he a lot of money?'

'Yes, he's the richest man that we know.'

'How much older than you is he?'

'Twenty years, maybe more.'

'And is he, perhaps, an unpleasant man?'

'No, he's not unpleasant.'

'Well, child, all I can say is this - don't accept this engagement if it doesn't please you. You're comfortable here in my house, I hope, and I like having you here.'

'Thank you, Mrs Wace. You're very kind to me. But here comes my difficulty. I don't like teaching. Ah, you're surprised. That's because I've hidden it from everyone. Well, I really hate school. The children are awful little

things, who make trouble all day long. But even they are not as bad as the inspector. For the three months before his visit I woke up several times every night, worrying about it. It's so difficult knowing what to teach and what to leave untaught! I think father and mother are right. They say I'll never be a good teacher if I don't like the work, so I should marry Mr Heddegan and then I won't need to work. I don't know what 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.

CHAPTER TWO

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.

'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.'

'Perhaps that's because I'm a teacher.'

'Oh no, it isn't. It's because I'm starting a new life. Next week I'm going to marry Mr David Heddegan.'

At this unexpected reply, the young man took a step back. 'Who is Mr David Heddegan?' he said, trying to sound bored.

'He owns a number of shops on St Maria's, and he's my father's neighbour and oldest friend.'

'So, no longer a schoolteacher, just a shopkeeper's wife. I knew you would never succeed as a teacher. You're like a woman who thinks she can be a great actress just because she has a beautiful face, and forgets she has to be able to act. But you found out your mistake early, didn't you?'

'Don't be unpleasant to me, Charles,' Baptista said sadly.

'I'm not being unpleasant - I'm just saying what is true, in a friendly way - although I do have good reason to

be unpleasant to you. What a hurry you've been in, Baptista! I do hate a woman in a hurry!

'What do you mean?'

'Well - in a hurry to be somebody's wife. Any husband is better than no husband for you, it seems. You couldn't wait for me, oh no! Well, thank God, that's all in the past for me!'

'Wait for you? What does that mean, Charley? You never showed that you felt anything special for me.'

'Oh really, Baptista dear!'

'What I mean is, there was nothing that I could be sure of. I suppose you liked me a little, but I didn't think you meant 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 forever!'

'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 forever. 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, although you were in too much of a hurry to wait for me!'

'Oh, it isn't possible to think of that!' she cried, shaking her head. 'At home everything will be ready for the wedding!'

'If we marry, it must be at once. This evening you can come back with me to Trufal, the town where I live. We can get married there on Tuesday, and then no Mr David Heddegan, or anyone else, can take you away from me!'

'But I must go home on the Tuesday boat,' she said worriedly. 'What will they think if I don't arrive?'

'You can go home on that boat just the same. The only difference is that I'll go with you. You'll tell your parents that you've married a young man with a good job, someone that you met at the training college. When I meet them, they'll accept that we're married and it can't be changed. And you won't be miserable for ever as the wife of an awful old man. Now honestly, you do like me best, don't you, Baptista?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Then we will do what I say.'

CHAPTER THREE

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 Pen-zephyr.

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 hope you're well, my dear?' he said. He was a healthy, red-faced man of fifty-five. 'I wanted to come across to meet you. What bad luck that you missed the boat on Saturday!'

And Baptista had to agree, and smile, and make conversation. Mr Heddegan had spoken to her before she was ready to say anything. Now the moment had passed.

When the boat arrived, her parents were there to meet her. Her father walked home beside Mr Heddegan, while her mother walked next to Baptista, talking all the time.

'I'm so happy, my child,' said Mrs Trewthen in her loud, cheerful voice, 'that you've kept your promise to marry Mr Heddegan. How busy we've been! But now things are all ready for the wedding, and a few friends and neighbours are coming in for supper this evening.' Again,

the moment for confessing had passed, and Baptista stayed silent.

When they reached home, Mrs Trewthen said, 'Now, Baptista, hurry up to your room and take off your hat, then come downstairs. I must go to the kitchen.'

The young woman passively obeyed her mother's orders. The evening was a great success for all except Baptista. She had no chance to tell her parents the news, and it was already much more difficult than it had been at first. By the end of the evening, when all the neighbours had left, she found herself alone in her bedroom again. She had come home with much to say, and had said none of it. She now realized that she was not brave enough to tell her story. And as the clock struck midnight, she decided it should stay untold.

Morning came, and when she thought of Charles, it was more with fear than with love. Her mother called from downstairs, 'Baptista! Time to get up! Mr Heddegan will be at the church in three-quarters of an hour!'

Baptista got out of bed, looked out of the window, and took the easy way. She put her best clothes on, confessed nothing, and kept her promise to marry David Heddegan.

CHAPTER FOUR

The honeymoon

Mr Heddegan did not worry about his new wife's coldness towards him during and after the wedding. 'I know she was reluctant to marry me,' he thought, 'but that will pass. Things'll be different in a few months' time!'

During the wedding dinner, someone asked Heddegan about the honeymoon. To Baptista's horror, he answered, 'Oh, we're going to spend a few days in Pen-zephyr.'

'What!' cried Baptista. 'I know nothing of this!' Because of her late arrival, Heddegan had not been able to ask where she would like to spend the honeymoon, so he had arranged a trip to the mainland. It was difficult to change these plans at the last minute, so she had to agree, and that evening she and her new husband arrived in Pen-zephyr.

Their first problem was finding a hotel, because the fine weather had filled the town with tourists. They walked from place to place, Heddegan polite and friendly, Baptista cold and silent. Finally they found an excellent hotel, which to their surprise was empty. Kindly Mr Heddegan, who wanted to please his young wife, asked for the best room on the first floor, with a good view of the sea.

'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.

'Where is - the other gentleman?' asked Baptista.

'He's in the next room, madam. He was in here.'

'But I can't hear him! I don't think he's there.'

'He makes no noise, but he's there,' replied the girl.

Suddenly Baptista understood what the girl meant, and a cold hand lay on her heart.

'Why is he so silent?' she whispered.

'If I tell you, please don't say anything to the landlady,' begged the girl, 'or I'll lose my job! It's because he's dead. He's the young teacher who drowned yesterday. They brought his body here, and that's why there's nobody staying in the hotel. People don't like a dead body in the house. But we've changed the sheets and cleaned the room, madam!'

Just then Heddegan arrived with the smelling salts, and the girl left the room. 'Any better?' he asked Baptista.

'I don't like the hotel!' she cried. 'We'll have to leave!'

For the first time Heddegan spoke crossly to his wife.

'Now that's enough, Baptists! First you want one thing, then another! It's cost me enough, in money and words, to get this fine room, and it's too much to expect me to find another hotel at this time of the evening. We'll stay quietly here tonight, do ye hear? And find another place tomorrow.'

The young woman said no more. Her mind was cold with horror. That night she lay between the two men who

she had married, David Heddegan on one side, and, on the other side through the bedroom wall, Charles Stow.

CHAPTER FIVE

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?'

She knew he was right, and paid him what he wanted. A week later the workman sent his wife to ask for more money, and again Baptista paid. But when there was a fourth visit, she refused to pay, and shut the door in the man's surprised face.

She knew she had to tell her husband everything. She liked him better now than she had done at first, and did not want to lose him, but her secret was no longer safe. She went to find him, and said, 'David, I have something to tell you.'

'Yes, my dear,' he said with a sigh. In the last week he had been less cheerful and had seemed worried about something.

When they were both in the sitting room, she said, 'David, perhaps you will hate me for this, but I must confess something that I've hidden from you. It happened before we were married. And it's about a lover.'

'I don't mind. In fact, I was hoping it was more than that.'

'Well, it was. I met my old lover by chance, and he asked me, and - well, I married him. We were coming here to tell you, but he drowned, and I said nothing about him, and then I married you, David, for peace and quietness. Now you'll be angry with me, I know you will!'

She spoke wildly, and expected her husband to shout and scream. But instead, the old man jumped up and began to dance happily around the room.

'Oh, wonderful! he cried. How lucky! My dear Baptista, I see a way out of my difficulty - ha-ha!'

'What do you mean?' she asked, afraid he had gone mad.

'Oh my dear, I've got something to confess too! You see, I was friendly with a woman in Pen-zephyr for many years - very friendly, you could say - and in the end I married her just before she died. I kept it secret, but people here are beginning to talk. And I've got four big girls to think of-'

'Oh David, four daughters!' she cried in horror.

'That's right, my dear. I'm sorry to say they haven't been to school at all. I'd like to bring them to live here with us, and I thought, by marrying a teacher, I could get someone to teach them, all for nothing. What do you think, Baptista?'

'Four grown girls, always around the house! And I hate teaching, it kills me! But I must do it, I can see that. I am punished for that moment of madness, I really am!'

Here the conversation ended. The next day Baptista had to welcome her husband's daughters into her home. They were not good-looking or intelligent or even well-dressed, and poor Baptista could only look forward to years of hard work with them. She went about, sighing miserably, with no hope for the future.

But when Heddegan asked her a month later, 'How do you like 'em now?' her answer was unexpected.

'Much better than at first,' she said. 'I may like them very much one day.'

And so began a more pleasant time for Baptista Heddegan.

She had discovered what kind, gentle girls these unwelcome daughters were. At first she felt sorry for them, then grew to like them. And from liking, she grew to love them. In the end they brought her and her husband closer together, and so Baptista and David were able to put the past behind them and find unexpected happiness in their married life.

- THE END -

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