

What the Shepherd Saw

by Thomas Hardy

(Adapted book. Pre-Intermediate level)

CHAPTER ONE

First night

The Christmas moon was showing her cold face to the low hills called the Marlbury Downs, in the southwestern 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 passersby. 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 newborn 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.'

'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.

'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.

CHAPTER TWO

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.

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.'

'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.

CHAPTER THREE

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!'

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.

CHAPTER FOUR

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.

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.

- THE END -

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