

The Three Strangers

Adapted by Burton Bumgarner

from the short story by Thomas Hardy

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STORY OF THE PLAY

The clever short story, "The Three Strangers," by English Victorian writer Thomas Hardy, has been skillfully adapted to a rural Appalachian setting. On a snowy winter's afternoon, a farmer and his wife are celebrating the christening of their infant daughter with friends and family. The party is interrupted by the arrival of a stranger, a poorly-dressed man seeking shelter from the cold. Soon a second stranger appears. This man is finely dressed and acts pompous and offensive. The guests are impressed by the humility of the first man, and angered by the arrogance and bravado of the second. Then, a third stranger arrives. He enters the farmhouse, looks briefly at the first two strangers, then turns and runs back into the cold. What unusual, unconventional and unspoken relationship do the three strangers have with each other? The mystery is solved when the guests are sent out into the snowy evening to search for the third stranger.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(8 m, 4 w)

BENJAMIN: An Appalachian farmer.

HANNAH: Benjamin's wife.

ALTON: Benjamin's brother, the local constable.

LAURIE: Alton's wife.

JOHN: A farmer and neighbor.

EMILY: John's wife.

HERBERT: Another farmer and neighbor.

EMMA: Herbert's wife.

STRANGER 1: Poorly dressed, meek and polite.

STRANGER 2: Finely dressed, pompous and rude.

STRANGER 3: Moderately dressed, confused.

JAILER

SETTING

The play is set in a cabin in the Appalachian mountains following the War Between the States. A front door is UPS, with a hall tree nearby. An old-fashioned cradle and chairs are USC. There is a fireplace and dining table DSR. Plates of food and a pot of hot cider are on the table, as are several extra pewter mugs. DSR are several wooden chairs.

PROPS

Mugs, cider, plates, food, baby in blanket, extra blanket, hot pan, money, small piece of wood, rope to tie hands, overcoats for the men.

Sound effects: Dogs barking, baby crying. During the blackout fiddle music is heard.

The Three Strangers

(AT RISE: The GUESTS may be dancing a square dance, or frozen in place until the MUSIC fades. Once music fades, the party comes alive. For several counts the guests move about, pour drinks into the mugs, talk noisily. ALTON and BENJAMIN move DS. Alton is a bit tipsy. His arm is around Benjamin's shoulders.)

ALTON: You do throw a fine celebration, little brother. In spite of the snow and the cold, I'm feeling quite warm.

BENJAMIN: It's not every day a man can celebrate the christening of his first daughter.

ALTON: And a beautiful little daughter she is. My only niece ... so far. *(HE laughs.)*

BENJAMIN: Are you saying there should be more?

ALTON: The more children, the happier the home. Didn't our grandmother say that?

BENJAMIN: Didn't half of her ten children die from influenza?

ALTON: They did. But things are different now. We have a doctor in the area.

(LAURIE crosses to BENJAMIN and hands him a mug of cider.)

LAURIE: A doctor, but no preacher.

BENJAMIN: There's a preacher in Mountain Home.

LAURIE: He's only visiting.

BENJAMIN: He's here long enough to give our child a proper christening.

ALTON: I'll take one doctor over ten preachers.

LAURIE: *(Horried.)* Alton! What a terrible thing to say!

ALTON: It's only the truth, my dear.

LAURIE: It's that hard cider you've been drinking all afternoon!

The Three Strangers

-5-

ALTON: And I intend to drink it far into the evening! On a day like this a man needs more than the fire to keep him warm!

LAURIE: Don't look at me! I'm not keeping you warm!
(Crosses to the table.)

BENJAMIN: I believe it's time for another dance. Where did that fiddler go?

EMILY: He went home. He said you only paid him for two hours.

EMMA: He wasn't very good and he'll be lucky if he can even find his way home.

HERBERT: Now, dear. We don't want the fiddler to get lost just because he wasn't very good.

EMMA: *(Discourteously.)* I didn't say I wanted the fiddler to get lost! He's been drinking the hard cider all afternoon and I think he'll be lucky to find his way home without serious injury to himself! That's all! Why don't you listen to what I say?

HERBERT: I do listen, dear. It's just that you say so much.

EMMA: *(With anger.)* WHAT? *(HERBERT quickly crosses to the fireplace.)*

BENJAMIN: Well, I wish I'd paid him more. My feet are getting cold. I need a dance with my wife. *(Crossing to HANNAH and taking her hands.)*

ALTON: My guess is, dancing is all you'll be doing!

(ALL laugh. There is a KNOCK at the door. All freeze.)

HANNAH: Who could that be? All of our guests are here.

LAURIE: Maybe the fiddler has returned.

EMMA: Knocking at the front door? What kind of man goes out the back door and comes around to the front door?

HERBERT: Maybe he became lost.

BENJAMIN: I'll see who it is.

(BENJAMIN crosses to the door and opens it. STRANGER 1 enters wearing a tattered coat, hat and boots.)

The Three Strangers

-6-

STRANGER 1: I'm sorry to bother you. But I was ... I was trying to reach my home this evening, but my feet are so cold from the snow.

BENJAMIN: We won't have a man with cold feet. Come in.

STRANGER 1: *(Looking around.)* You seem to be having a party. I'm sorry for interrupting.

BENJAMIN: A christening party for my daughter. My firstborn child.

HANNAH: *(Crosses to BENJAMIN.)* OUR first born child.

BENJAMIN: It WAS you who did the birthing, wasn't it dear?

HANNAH: You were certainly no help. *(Leads STRANGER 1 to the fireplace.)* Please come in and warm yourself by the fire. *(SHE takes HIS coat and hat and hangs them on a hall tree.)* Goodness. Your coat is wet with snow. You must be freezing.

STRANGER 1: I do thank you. And I don't want to be a nuisance. I'll leave as soon as I'm warm.

BENJAMIN: *(Crossing to the table and pouring cider in a mug.)* You'll be needing this to warm your toes.

STRANGER 1: *(Sniffs the mug.)* Hard cider.

ALTON: Just the thing to warm ya up on a winter's day.

BENJAMIN: We're the Hardys. This is my brother, Alton, and his wife, Laurie. And these are our neighbors, the Williams and the McDonalds.

(STRANGER 1 nods politely. THEY wait for him to speak, but he's silent.)

EMMA: Well? Do you have a name?

STRANGER 1: Yes. It's ... it's ... *(Hesitates.)* Fox, Jerry Fox.

LAURIE: Isn't it late in the day to be traveling, Mr. Fox?

STRANGER 1: I suppose it is.

EMILY: And you're not well-dressed for this weather.

STRANGER 1: I was down in the lowlands.

EMMA: I knew it! Lowlanders don't have a bit of sense.

JOHN: Winter comes earlier in the hills. A traveler should know that.

STRANGER 1: I know that well.

End of Freeview

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