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The Mayor of Casterbridge
PRE-AP*/AP*

By Thomas Hardy

RESOURCE GUIDE

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Among the other papers had been placed the contents of his wife’s little desk, the keys of which had been handed to him at her request. Here was the letter addressed to him with the restriction, “Not to be opened till Elizabeth-Jane’s wedding-day.”

Mrs. Henchard, though more patient than her husband, had been no practical hand at anything. In sealing up the sheet, which was folded and tucked in without an envelope, in the old-fashioned way, she had overlaid the junction with a large mass of wax without the requisite under-touch of the same. The seal had cracked, and the letter was open. Henchard had no reason to suppose the restriction one of serious weight, and his feeling for his late wife had not been of the nature of deep respect. “Some trifling fancy or other of poor Susan’s, I suppose,” he said; and without curiosity he allowed his eyes to scan the letter:—

My Dear Michael,—For the good of all of us I have kept one thing a secret from you till now. I hope you will understand why; I think you will; though perhaps you may not forgive me. But, dear Michael, I have done it for the best. I shall be in my grave when you read this, and Elizabeth-Jane will have a home. Don’t curse me, Mike—think of how I was situated. I can hardly write it, but here it is. Elizabeth-Jane is not your Elizabeth-Jane—the child who was in my arms when you sold me. No; she died three months after that, and this living one is my other husband’s. I christened her by the same name we had given to the first, and she filled up the ache I felt at the other’s loss. Michael, I am dying, and I might have held my tongue; but I could not. Tell her husband of this or not, as you may judge; and forgive, if you can, a woman you once deeply wronged, as she forgives you.

Susan Henchard

Her husband regarded the paper as if it were a window-pane through which he saw for miles. His lips twitched, and he seemed to compress his frame, as if to bear better. His usual habit was not to consider whether destiny were hard upon him or not—the shape of his ideas in cases of affliction being simply a moody “I am to suffer, I perceive.” “This much scourging, then, is it for me?” But now through his passionate head there stormed this thought—that the blasting disclosure was what he had deserved.

His wife’s extreme reluctance to have the girl’s name altered from Newson to Henchard was now accounted for fully. It furnished another illustration of that honesty in dishonesty which had characterized her in other things.

He remained unnerved and purposeless for near a couple of hours; till he suddenly said, “Ah—I wonder if it is true!”

He jumped up in an impulse, kicked off his slippers, and went with a candle to the door of Elizabeth-Jane’s room, where he put his ear to the keyhole and listened. She was breathing profoundly. Henchard softly turned the handle, entered, and shading the light, approached the bedside. Gradually bringing the light from behind a screening curtain he held it in such manner that it fell slantwise on her face without shining on her eyes. He steadfastly regarded her features. They were fair; his were dark. But this was an unimportant preliminary. In sleep there come to the surface buried genealogical facts, ancestral curves, dead men’s traits, which the mobility of daytime animation screens and overwhelms. In the present statuesque repose of the young girl’s countenance Richard Newson’s was unmistakably reflected. He could not endure the sight of her, and hastened away.

Misery taught him nothing more than defiant endurance of it. His wife was dead, and the first impulse for revenge died with the thought that she was beyond him. He looked out at the night as at a fiend. Henchard, like all his kind, was
superstitious, and he could not help thinking that the concatenation of events this evening had produced was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him. Yet they had developed naturally. If he had not revealed his past history to Elizabeth he would not have searched the drawer for papers, and so on.

The mockery was, that he should have no sooner taught a girl to claim the shelter of his paternity than he discovered her to have no kinship with him.

This ironical sequence of things angered him like an impish trick from a fellow-creature. Like Prester John’s, his table had been spread, and infernal harpies had snatched up the food. He went out of the house, and moved sullenly onward down the pavement till he came to the bridge at the bottom of the High Street. Here he turned in upon a bypath on the river bank, skirting the north-east limits of the town.

These precincts embodied the mournful phases of Casterbridge life, as the south avenues embodied its cheerful moods. The whole way along here was sunless, even in summer time; in spring, white frosts lingered here when other places were steaming with warmth; while in winter it was the seed-field of all aches, rheumatisms, and torturing cramps of the year. The Casterbridge doctors must have pined away for want of sufficient nourishment but for the configuration of the landscape on the north-eastern side.

The river—slow, noiseless, and dark—the Schwarzwalser of Casterbridge—ran beneath a low cliff, the two together forming a defence which had rendered walls and artificial earth-works on this side unnecessary. Here were ruins of a Franciscan priory, and a mill attached to the same, the water of which roared down a back-hatch like the voice of desolation. Above the cliff, and behind the river, rose a pile of buildings, and in the front of the pile a square mass cut into the sky. It was like a pedestal lacking its statue. This missing feature, without which the design remained incomplete, was, in truth, the corpse of a man; for the square mass formed the base of the gallows, the extensive buildings at the back being the county gaol. In the meadow where Henchard now walked the mob were wont to gather whenever an execution took place, and there to the tune of the roaring weir they stood and watched the spectacle.

The exaggeration which darkness imparted to the glooms of this region impressed Henchard more than he had expected. The lugubrious harmony of the spot with his domestic situation was too perfect for him, impatient of effects, scenes, and adumbrations. It reduced his heartburning to melancholy, and he exclaimed, “Why the deuce did I come here!” He went on past the cottage in which the old local hangman had lived and died, in times before that calling was monopolized over all England by a single gentleman; and climbed up by a steep back lane into the town.

32. In lines 1-12, Henchard’s attitude toward Susan could best be described as

(A) scornful  
(B) condescending  
(C) compassionate  
(D) suspicious  
(E) sentimental
33. The phrase “without curiosity” (line 12) is best understood to be

   (A) an ironic comment on Henchard, who is clearly curious about the letter
   (B) a matter-of-fact statement of Henchard’s nonchalant attitude toward the letter
   (C) an authorial criticism of Henchard’s lack of interest in the letter
   (D) a hint to the reader that the letter is important
   (E) a detail intended to highlight Henchard’s general lack of emotion

34. Which of the following contrasts is NOT evident in Henchard’s responses in lines 25-56?

   (A) hopefulness and acceptance of reality
   (B) superstition and logic
   (C) loyalty and disloyalty
   (D) resentment and resignation
   (E) denying responsibility and accepting responsibility

35. The allusion in lines 58-59 most likely refers to a man who experienced

   (A) thwarted expectations
   (B) near starvation
   (C) deception from his wife
   (D) trickery by his acquaintances
   (E) a feast and then a famine

36. In the sentence in lines 66-68, the words “must” and “want” could best be restated, respectively, as

   (A) “should” and “desire”
   (B) “could” and “hope”
   (C) “inevitably” and “scarcity”
   (D) “would” and “lack”
   (E) “clearly” and “need”

37. Which of the following contributes LEAST to the “lugubrious harmony of the spot with [Henchard’s] domestic situation”?

   (A) “ruins of a Franciscan priory” (lines 71-72)
   (B) “like the voice of desolation” (line 73)
   (C) “a pedestal lacking its statue” (lines 74-75)
   (D) “the base of the gallows” (lines 76-77)
   (E) “the glooms of this region” (line 81)
ANSWER EXPLANATIONS

PASSAGE 5

32. (B) condescending. Henchard sees no reason to assume that a restriction made by Susan could have “serious weight.” He did not have “deep respect” for his late wife, and he assumes that all “poor Susan” could have put into a letter would be “some trifling fancy.”

33. (B) a matter-of-fact statement of Henchard’s nonchalant attitude toward the letter. Assuming that the letter cannot be anything more than a “trifling fancy,” Henchard truly is not curious about it. Henchard is not generally lacking in emotion, only when it comes to Susan, whom he does not respect.

34. (C) loyalty and disloyalty. There is no contrast between loyalty and disloyalty evident in Henchard’s responses. For a brief moment, he is hopeful that the revelation is not true, but then he accepts the reality that Elizabeth-Jane is Newson’s daughter. He superstitiously thinks that “some sinister intelligence” is trying to punish him, yet he acknowledges logically that his own behavior brought this crisis about. He resents how “hard upon him” destiny seems to be, but he is resigned to the fact that “the blasting disclosure was what he had deserved” and that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter. He alternately blames destiny and the “sinister intelligence” and accepts responsibility for having revealed his past to Elizabeth and for searching the drawers.

35. (A) thwarted expectations. Prester John, a character in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, is the blind king of Ethiopia who, while the richest man in the world, starves to death because “harpies” steal the food from his table. Students do not need to know this to answer the question correctly. The lines describe a man who, when “his table had been spread,” had his food “snatched up” by “infernal harpies.” Henchard and Prester John are alike in having thwarted expectations, not in experiencing near starvation.

36. (D) “would” and “lack.” Since those in the south of Casterbridge enjoy good health, if the northern part were not a source of “aches, rheumatisms, and torturing cramps,” the doctors would have pined away for lack of patients to treat.

37. (C) “a pedestal lacking its statue.” The dismal setting is in “lugubrious harmony” with Henchard’s miserable domestic situation. The phrase “a pedestal lacking its statue” does not carry the emotional connotations of “ruins,” “desolation,” “gallows,” and “glooms.

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