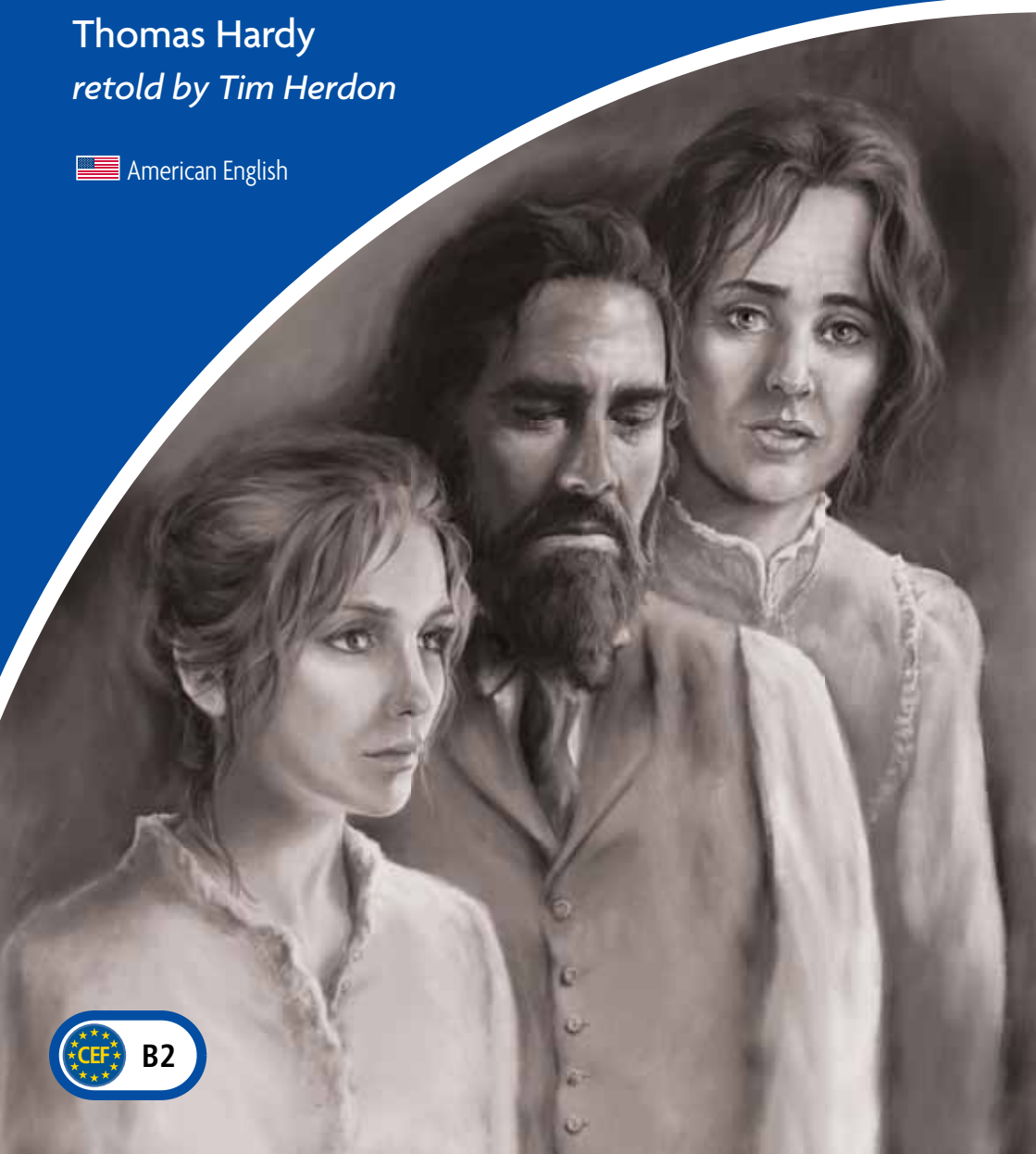


The Mayor of Casterbridge

Thomas Hardy
retold by Tim Herdon

 American English



People in the story

Michael Henchard: a farm worker that rises to become the Mayor of Casterbridge; he is married to Susan Henchard

Susan Henchard: a weak woman; she is married to Michael Henchard

Elizabeth-Jane: Susan's daughter; she has a quiet, strong character

Donald Farfrae: a Scot that becomes very successful in Casterbridge because of his intelligence and kindness

Lucetta Templeton: a woman that knows Michael Henchard from the past

BEFORE YOU READ

- 1 Look at the cover and *People in the story*. Who do you think the people on the cover are?

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Looking for work



A man and a woman carrying a little girl in her arms slowly approached the village of Weydon-Priors on foot. It was a late summer evening and the man hoped to find work in the surrounding farms. There were many villages like this in this part of

southwest England, and in the early part of the nineteenth century a young man could always find work if he was prepared to look for it.

The man, Michael Henchard, was young and tall, he had a serious-looking face, and he was very sun-tanned from spending many hours working in the fields. His wife, Susan, was also young and her face might have been attractive once, but now it had the bitter look of a woman who had been badly treated by life. Although they walked side by side and they were clearly a small family, there was no sense of closeness or fondness between them. He was reading something on a sheet of paper and he seemed to almost not notice her. She, having nothing to say to him, spoke quietly and softly to her little daughter.

* * *

As they got closer and closer to the village, they heard the sounds of a fair. They walked toward it and came across a number of large, square tents, which were selling different kinds of food and drink. Hungry after their long walk, they decided to eat something and went into one of the tents. Inside they found people sitting at long, narrow tables that went along each side of the tent. In the middle, there was a red-faced woman serving “furmity¹” from a big pot over a fire. This was a hot mixture of corn², milk, raisins, and other ingredients. The young woman ordered three bowls of furmity and they sat down to eat.

Despite being hungry, Michael Henchard did not like the mixture and wished it was a glass of beer instead. As he was thinking this, he noticed that, for a little extra money, the old woman added alcohol to the furmity of some of the others in the tent. She poured it quickly and quietly from a bottle, which she kept under the table. So he passed his bowl to her and, with a little nod and a smile, she added some alcohol to his, too. Now he found the furmity a much tastier mixture. In fact, it was so tasty that he soon asked for more.

After the first bowl he felt relaxed, and after the second he was sharing amusing stories with other men in the tent. The third made him a little aggressive, and after the fourth he was looking for trouble. The young woman saw, too late, that it was going to be difficult to change her husband's mood. Their little daughter, who had been quiet up to that point, was now tired and beginning to complain.

"Michael, it's time to leave. We have to find a place to spend the night," she reminded him, trying to pull him away from the table.

* * *

But Henchard was not listening to her. The conversation among the men had turned to the high ideals of youth and the low realities of later life.

"I got married when I was eighteen, like a fool," said Henchard, with bitterness. "I could have been someone important – I could have made my fortune. But instead, here I am, with only fifteen shillings³ in my pocket and two extra mouths to feed."

It was getting late and outside the tent the fair was coming to an end. The shouts of men wanting to sell their last few animals could be heard.

"Who'll take this last horse?" shouted one man. "She's a fine animal, just a little over five years old, but there's nothing wrong with her at all. Who'll give me forty shillings for her? You won't get a better price than that."

* * *

Hearing these shouts from inside the tent, Henchard said in a loud voice, "Those men out there can get rid of their horses when they don't want them. Why can't we do that with our wives, too?"

One or two men laughed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there was someone who would buy *your* wife from you. She looks like a fine woman," said one of them.

Now was a good time to stop this joke: to continue with it would not be sensible. But Henchard was in no mood to be sensible.

“Well, here’s your chance. What will you offer me for this rare beauty?” he said, pointing at Susan.

“Michael, you’ve said things like this before, but this joke is no longer funny,” said the young woman.

“I know I’ve said it before and I meant it. All I want is a buyer,” he replied.

Raising his voice he said, “Well, is anyone interested? If you are, now’s your chance.”

Again there were a few laughs. Susan begged him to leave the tent, “Come on Michael, it’s getting dark and I’ve had enough of this nonsense. If you don’t come now, I will leave without you.”

But Henchard did not move; it was almost as if he didn’t hear her. This time his voice was even louder, “This woman is no good to me. Who among you will buy her?”