

THE STRANGER

When young Tim told his mother over breakfast that he would be seeing the stranger again that morning, she became understandably alarmed.

"What stranger?" she asked, trying not to sound too worried.

"The one I came across yesterday," answered Tim, between mouthfuls of breakfast cereal.

"Yesterday," said his mother. "You met a stranger yesterday? I hope you didn't speak to him."

"He spoke to me first," said Tim, as he was finishing his cereal. "That's how I found him."

"But you didn't speak back, did you?" asked his mother, "You know what your Dad and I have said to you about speaking to strangers."

"I know," said Tim, as he wondered whether to have another bowl of cereal or not. "But that's with *strangers*. He's not *strangers*; he's *the* Stranger."

"*The* Stranger?" asked his mother. "What do you mean: he's not *strangers*, but *the* Stranger?"

"I mean," said Tim as he poured milk onto his cereal, "he's not somebody in the street. He lives in our orchard. He's the Stranger in the orchard."

"In our orchard!" shrieked his mother, now quite alarmed. "You mean there's some old tramp living in our orchard!"

She hastily went to the back door and locked it; then checked all the windows.

"What are doing, Mum?" asked Tim.

"What am I doing!" she said with exasperation. "What am I doing! What does it look like? I don't want your tramp coming in here stealing things."

"But Mum," said Tim, between more mouthfuls. "He can't leave the orchard. Besides," he added, as he tipped his bowl to get the last bit of cereal out, "He's not a tramp. He doesn't look like a tramp at all. He's too neatly dressed."

"I don't know," mumbled his mother, "I really don't know what to make of it all."

Then looking at Tim, she added: "You're not going out – not till I've spoken to your Dad."

With that she went off to find her mobile phone. She remembered leaving it in the bedroom.

They had moved here only a week ago. It was an old house and had a lot of land belonging to it. Part had been looked after as lawn with flower borders; but much had been neglected for years, including the old orchard beyond the overgrown vegetable garden.

Tim had been exploring the grounds during the past week. His mother had seen him in the orchard yesterday, climbing some of the old trees. She had shouted across to him to be careful as some of the branches could be rotten. She had been worried about his injuring himself; it had never occurred to her that he would meet someone there.

She found her mobile and phoned her husband. She explain about the

stranger living in their orchard.

"Are you sure it's a real person, Penny?" her husband asked.

"What do mean, Harry? A real person?" she asked.

"You know what an imagination Tim has," he replied. "Tim always had imaginary friends when he was very young. He's imagined some one there among all those old trees."

"An imaginary friend?" she said. "I thought he'd grown out of that by now."

"Well, just think, Penny," said Tim's father. "A *neatly* dressed person, *living* in the orchard. That's not very likely, is it?"

"No, I suppose not," said Tim's mother, feeling slightly foolish.

"No, it isn't," agreed Tim's father. "I shouldn't worry. Let him go off to play – but keep an eye on him if you're still a bit worried."

"OK," she replied. "I suppose you're right."

"Don't worry," he said, trying to sound reassuring. "I'll try to get back early this afternoon. Bye!"

"Bye!" she replied, and went back into the kitchen.

"Ah, Tim," she said. "Your neatly dressed stranger – how exactly was he dressed."

"Oh," said Tim, finishing his toast, "He had one of those funny wigs and was dressed a bit like those men you see in that serial you and Dad watch on Sunday evening."

"But that's how they used to be three hundred years ago!" she said.

"I know," said Tim, wondering if two bowls of cereal and two slices of toast would really be enough to see him through the morning, "That's his time, I think. So that's how he would be dressed, wouldn't he?"

"Yes. yes," said his mother, rather abstractedly, wondering what Tim meant by "That's his time."

She went to the back door and unlocked it; then looking out, she called back to Tim: "I think it's going to be another fine day. I suppose you'll be wanting to get off outside."

"Thanks, Mum," he called back.

Soon Tim was off out into the garden, exploring again. His mother watched him from the house, as he gradually made his way up to the orchard. From time to time she went into the garden, always somewhere near the orchard. Once or twice she caught sight of Tim and waved to him as she pretended to be clearing the vegetable patch. But she saw no one else there. She thought she heard Tim speaking on one occasion; but there was no other voice besides Tim's and he did have a habit of speaking to birds, bees or whatever else took his fancy.

Back in the house, the phrase "That's his time" kept running through her mind. Then suddenly she collapsed on the settee.

"Good grief!" she thought, "it's a ghost. The Stranger must be ghost! His bones are buried up there in the orchard. Tim said he lived in the orchard. That must be it!"

She phoned her husband again and told him Tim's stranger must be a ghost.

"We can't stay here, Harry," she finished, "not with those bones up

there in the orchard. I want to move!"

"Now hang on, Penny," he answered. "We've only been here a week; we can't go moving again so soon. Anyway, how do you know it's a ghost? Have *you* seen anything? Have you asked Tim?"

"No," she replied, "but he said 'That's his time' – the 18th century is his time. It has to be a ghost!"

"Look," said her husband, "we both know how imaginative Tim can be; there's probably quite a different explanation. Just try and stay calm. I'll get home for lunch. Bye!"

Tim's mother spent a worried hour or so waiting for Tim's father to come back. She never went anywhere near the orchard. "I always thought the old trees looked creepy; the place is haunted," she thought to herself.

At last Tim's father came back. She ran out to meet him.

"Come on, Penny," he said to her encouragingly. "Let's go up to the orchard and find young Tim."

They soon found him up in one the trees there.

"Hello, son!" called Tim's father.

"Ah Dad!, You're home for lunch," called Tim, "Great."

"Yes," he said. "I got away early today. Mum's been telling me you've found a stranger somewhere here."

"Yes, Dad," Tim said, "*The Stranger*. I dug him up yesterday . I'm going to bring him back to the house this afternoon. I think he would like to be cleaned up a bit."

His mother shuddered as she heard this. "He's not bringing a lot of old bones into the house," she thought.

"You dug him up yesterday?" said his father, "Where's he now.? Shall we meet him?"

"He's up here with me in the tree," said Tim brightly. "Here, Dad – catch!"

Tim threw something from the tree. His father was an accomplished sportsman and had no difficulty catching the Stranger, who turned out to be a rather grubby porcelain figurine, just under 22 centimetres in height.

When Tim's father saw it, he laughed and called out to Tim: "He's a fine little fellow, isn't he? Come on down. Let's have some lunch and we'll clean him up this afternoon."

Tim's mother, feeling very relieved but somewhat foolish, smiled and they all went in together.

That afternoon they carefully cleaned the little figurine and revealed an 18th century young man holding a fiddle. He seemed surprisingly undamaged, despite his burial in the orchard.

Tim's mother became very fond of the little figure and grew even fonder of it when she found out that it was a genuine 18th century figurine, and that Tim's Stranger was worth two to three thousand pounds.