

The Stranger by Katherine Mansfield

This short story, The Stranger, is a Mid-frequency Reader and has been adapted to suit readers with a vocabulary of 4000 words. It is available in three versions of different difficulty. This version is adapted from the Project Gutenberg version. It was adapted by Sonia Millet.

12. THE STRANGER

It seemed to the little crowd on the wharf that she was never going to move again. There she lay, immense, motionless on the grey water, a loop of smoke above her, an immense flock of sea birds screaming and diving after the food droppings at the stern. You could just see little couples parading--little flies walking up and down the dish on the grey tablecloth. Other flies clustered at the edge. Now there was a gleam of white on the lower deck--the cook's uniform or the stewardess perhaps. Now a tiny black spider raced up the ladder on to the bridge.

In the front of the crowd a strong-looking, middle-aged man, dressed very well in a grey coat, grey silk scarf, thick gloves and dark felt hat, marched up and down, swinging his folded umbrella. He seemed to be the leader of the little crowd on the wharf and at the same time to keep them together. He was something between the sheep-dog and the shepherd.

But what a fool--what a fool he had been not to bring any glasses! There wasn't a pair of glasses between the whole lot of them.

"Curious thing, Mr. Scott, that none of us thought of glasses. We might have been able to stir 'em up a bit. We might have managed a little signalling. 'Don't hesitate to land. Natives harmless.' Or: 'A welcome awaits you. All is forgiven.' What? Eh?"

Mr. Hammond's quick, eager glance, so nervous and yet so friendly and confiding, took in everybody on the wharf, roped in even those old men lounging against the walkways. They knew, every man-jack of them, that Mrs. Hammond was on that boat, and that he was so tremendously excited it never entered his head not to believe that this marvellous fact meant something to them too. It warmed his heart towards them. They were, he decided, as decent a crowd of people--Those old men over by the walkways, too--fine, solid old men. What chests--by Jove! And he squared his own, plunged his thick-gloved hands into his pockets, rocked from heel to toe.

"Yes, my wife's been in Europe for the last ten months. On a visit to our oldest girl, who was married last year. I brought her up here, as far as Salisbury, myself. So I thought I'd better come and fetch her back. Yes, yes, yes." The sharp grey eyes narrowed again and searched anxiously, quickly, the motionless ship. Again his coat was unbuttoned. Out came the thin, butter-yellow watch again, and for the twentieth--fiftieth--hundredth time he made the calculation.

"Let me see now. It was two fifteen when the doctor's launch went off. Two fifteen. It is now exactly twenty-eight minutes past four. That is to say, the doctor's been gone two hours and thirteen minutes. Two hours and thirteen minutes! Whee-ooh!" He gave a strange little half-whistle

and snapped his watch to again. "But I think we should have been told if there was anything up--don't you, Mr. Gaven?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Hammond! I don't think there's anything to--anything to worry about," said Mr. Gaven, knocking out his pipe against the heel of his shoe. "At the same time--"

"Quite so! Quite so!" cried Mr. Hammond. "Dashed annoying!" He paced quickly up and down and came back again to his stand between Mr. and Mrs. Scott and Mr. Gaven. "It's getting quite dark, too," and he waved his folded umbrella as though the dusk at least might have had the courtesy to keep off for a bit. But the dusk came slowly, spreading like a slow stain over the water. Little Jean Scott dragged at her mother's hand.

"I wan' my tea, mammy!" she wailed.

"I expect you do," said Mr. Hammond. "I expect all these ladies want their tea." And his kind, flushed, almost pitiful glance roped them all in again. He wondered whether Janey was having a final cup of tea in the restaurant out there. He hoped so; he thought not. It would be just like her not to leave the deck. In that case perhaps the deck steward would bring her up a cup. If he'd been there he'd have got it for her--somehow. And for a moment he was on deck, standing over her, watching her little hand fold round the cup in the way she had, while she drank the only cup of tea to be got on board... But now he was back here, and the Lord only knew when that cursed Captain would stop hanging about in the stream. He took another turn, up and down, up and down. He walked as far as the cab-stand to make sure his driver hadn't disappeared; back he turned again to the little flock crowded into the shelter of the banana boxes. Little Jean Scott was still wanting her tea. Poor little beggar! He wished he had a bit of chocolate on him.

"Here, Jean!" he said. "Like a lift up?" And easily, gently, he swung the little girl on to a higher barrel. The movement of holding her, steadying her, relieved him wonderfully, lightened his heart.

"Hold on," he said, keeping an arm round her.

"Oh, don't worry about Jean, Mr. Hammond!" said Mrs. Scott.

"That's all right, Mrs. Scott. No trouble. It's a pleasure. Jean's a little pal of mine, aren't you, Jean?"

"Yes, Mr. Hammond," said Jean, and she ran her finger down the fold of his felt hat.

But suddenly she caught him by the ear and gave a loud scream. "Lo-ok, Mr. Hammond! She's moving! Look, she's coming in!"

By Jove! So she was. At last! She was slowly, slowly turning round. A bell sounded far over the water and a great column of steam pushed into the air. The birds rose; they fluttered away like bits of white paper. And whether that deep beating was her engines or his heart Mr. Hammond

couldn't say. He had to nerve himself to bear it, whatever it was. At that moment old Captain Johnson, the harbour-master, came striding down the wharf, a leather portfolio under his arm.

"Jean'll be all right," said Mr. Scott. "I'll hold her." He was just in time. Mr. Hammond had forgotten about Jean. He sprang away to greet old Captain Johnson.

"Well, Captain," the eager, nervous voice rang out again, "you've taken pity on us at last."

"It's no good blaming me, Mr. Hammond," said old Captain Johnson, staring at the ship. "You got Mrs. Hammond on board, ain't yer?"

"Yes, yes!" said Hammond, and he kept by the harbour-master's side. "Mrs. Hammond's there. Hel-lo! We shan't be long now!"

With her telephone ring-ringing, the sound of her screw filling the air, the big ship bore down on them, cutting sharp through the dark water so that big white shavings curled to either side. Hammond and the harbour-master kept in front of the rest. Hammond took off his hat; he raked the decks--they were crowded with passengers; he waved his hat and shouted a loud, strange "Hel-lo!" across the water; and then turned round and burst out laughing and said something--nothing--to old Captain Johnson.

"Seen her?" asked the harbour-master.

"No, not yet. Steady--wait a bit!" And suddenly, between two great awkward-looking idiots--"Get out of the way there!" he signed with his umbrella--he saw a hand raised--a white glove shaking a handkerchief. Another moment, and--thank God, thank God!--there she was. There was Janey. There was Mrs. Hammond, yes, yes, yes--standing by the rail and smiling and nodding and waving her handkerchief.

"Well that's first class--first class! Well, well, well!" He positively stamped. Like lightning he drew out his cigar-case and offered it to old Captain Johnson. "Have a cigar, Captain! They're pretty good. Have a couple! Here"--and he pressed all the cigars in the case on the harbour-master--"I've a couple of boxes up at the hotel."

"Thanks, Mr. Hammond!" said old Captain Johnson.

Hammond stuffed the cigar-case back. His hands were shaking, but he'd got hold of himself again. He was able to face Janey. There she was, leaning on the rail, talking to some woman and at the same time watching him, ready for him. It struck him, as the gulf of water closed, how small she looked on that huge ship. His heart was squeezed with such a pain that he could have cried out. How little she looked to have come all that long way and back by herself! Just like her, though. Just like Janey. She had the courage of a--And now the crew had come forward and parted the passengers; they had lowered the rails for the walkways.

The voices on shore and the voices on board flew to greet each other.

"All well?"

"All well."

"How's mother?"

"Much better."

"Hullo, Jean!"

"Hello, Aunt Emily!"

"Had a good voyage?"

"Splendid!"

"Shan't be long now!"

"Not long now."

The engines stopped. Slowly she edged to the wharf-side.

"Make way there--make way--make way!" And the wharf hands brought the heavy walkways along at a sweeping run. Hammond signed to Janey to stay where she was. The old harbour-master stepped forward; he followed. As to "ladies first," or any rot like that, it never entered his head.

"After you, Captain!" he cried warmly. And, treading on the old man's heels, he strode up the walkway on to the deck in a bee-line to Janey, and Janey was clasped in his arms.

"Well, well, well! Yes, yes! Here we are at last!" he said. It was all he could say. And Janey emerged, and her cool little voice--the only voice in the world for him--said,

"Well, darling! Have you been waiting long?"

No; not long. Or, at any rate, it didn't matter. It was over now. But the point was, he had a cab waiting at the end of the wharf. Was she ready to go off. Was her luggage ready? In that case they could cut off sharp with her cabin luggage and let the rest go hang until to-morrow. He bent over her and she looked up with her familiar half-smile. She was just the same. Not a day changed. Just as he'd always known her. She laid her small hand on his sleeve.

"How are the children, John?" she asked.

(Hang the children!) "Perfectly well. Never better in their lives."

"Haven't they sent me letters?"

"Yes, yes--of course! I've left them at the hotel for you to digest later on."

"We can't go quite so fast," said she. "I've got people to say good-bye to--and then there's the Captain." As his face fell she gave his arm a small understanding squeeze. "If the Captain comes off the bridge I want you to thank him for having looked after your wife so beautifully." Well, he'd got her. If she wanted another ten minutes--As he gave way she was surrounded. The whole first-class seemed to want to say good-bye to Janey.

"Good-bye, dear Mrs. Hammond! And next time you're in Sydney I'll expect you."

"Darling Mrs. Hammond! You won't forget to write to me, will you?"

"Well, Mrs. Hammond, what this boat would have been without you!"

It was as plain as anything that she was by far the most popular woman on board. And she took it all--just as usual. Absolutely composed. Just her little self--just Janey all over; standing there with her veil thrown back. Hammond never noticed what his wife had on. It was all the same to him whatever she wore. But to-day he did notice that she wore a black "costume"--didn't they call it?--with white trimmings, he supposed they were, at the neck and sleeves. All this while Janey handed him round.

"John, dear!" And then: "I want to introduce you to--"

Finally they did escape, and she led the way to her state-room. To follow Janey down the passage that she knew so well--that was so strange to him; to part the green curtains after her and to step into the cabin that had been hers gave him exquisite happiness. But--Oh, no!--the stewardess was there on the floor, strapping up the rugs.

"That's the last, Mrs. Hammond," said the stewardess, rising and pulling down her sleeves.

He was introduced again, and then Janey and the stewardess disappeared into the passage. He heard whispers. She was getting the tipping business over, he supposed. He sat down on the striped sofa and took his hat off. There were the rugs she had taken with her; they looked good as new. All her luggage looked fresh, perfect. The labels were written in her beautiful little clear hand--"Mrs. John Hammond."

"Mrs. John Hammond!" He gave a long sigh of content and leaned back, crossing his arms. The strain was over. He felt he could have sat there for ever sighing his relief--the relief at being rid of that horrible tug, pull, grip on his heart. The danger was over. That was the feeling. They were on dry land again.

But at that moment Janey's head came round the corner.

"Darling--do you mind? I just want to go and say good-bye to the doctor."

Hammond started up. "I'll come with you."

"No, no!" she said. "Don't bother. I'd rather not. I'll not be a minute."

And before he could answer she was gone. He had half a mind to run after her; but instead he sat down again.

Would she really not be long? What was the time now? Out came the watch; he stared at nothing. That was rather strange of Janey, wasn't it? Why couldn't she have told the stewardess to say good-bye for her? Why did she have to go chasing after the ship's doctor? She could have sent a note from the hotel even if the affair had been urgent. Urgent? Did it--could it mean that she had been ill on the voyage--she was keeping something from him? That was it! He seized his hat. He was going off to find that fellow and to get the truth out of him at all costs. He thought he'd noticed just something. She was just a touch too calm--too steady. From the very first moment--

The curtains rang. Janey was back. He jumped to his feet.

"Janey, have you been ill on this voyage? You have!"

"Ill?" Her airy little voice mocked him. She stepped over the rugs, and came up close, touched his breast, and looked up at him.

"Darling," she said, "don't frighten me. Of course I haven't! Whatever makes you think I have? Do I look ill?"

But Hammond didn't see her. He only felt that she was looking at him and that there was no need to worry about anything. She was here to look after things. It was all right. Everything was.

The gentle pressure of her hand was so calming that he put his over hers to hold it there. And she said:

"Stand still. I want to look at you. I haven't seen you yet. You've had your beard beautifully trimmed, and you look--younger, I think, and decidedly thinner! Single life agrees with you."

"Agrees with me!" He groaned for love and caught her close again. And again, as always, he had the feeling that he was holding something that never was quite his--his. Something too delicate, too precious, that would fly away once he let go.

"For God's sake let's get off to the hotel so that we can be by ourselves!" And he rang the bell hard for some one to look sharp with the luggage.

Walking down the wharf together she took his arm. He had her on his arm again. And the difference it made to get into the cab after Janey--to throw the red-and-yellow striped blanket round them both--to tell the driver to hurry because neither of them had had any tea. No more going

without his tea or pouring out his own. She was back. He turned to her, squeezed her hand, and said gently, teasingly, in the "special" voice he had for her: "Glad to be home again, dearie?" She smiled; she didn't even bother to answer, but gently she drew his hand away as they came to the brighter streets.

"We've got the best room in the hotel," he said. "I wouldn't be put off with another. And I asked the maid to put in a bit of a fire in case you felt chilly. She's a nice girl. And I thought now we were here we wouldn't bother to go home to-morrow, but spend the day looking round and leave the morning after. Does that suit you? There's no hurry, is there? The children will have you soon enough... I thought a day's sight-seeing might make a nice break in your journey--eh, Janey?"

"Have you taken the tickets for the day after?" she asked.

"I should think I have!" He unbuttoned his coat and took out his bulging pocket-book. "Here we are! I reserved a first-class carriage to Cooktown. There it is--'Mr. and Mrs. John Hammond.' I thought we might as well do ourselves comfortably, and we don't want other people butting in, do we? But if you'd like to stop here a bit longer--?"

"Oh, no!" said Janey quickly. "Not for the world! The day after to-morrow, then. And the children--"

But they had reached the hotel. The manager was standing in the broad, brilliantly-lighted porch. He came down to greet them. A man ran from the hall for their boxes.

"Well, Mr. Arnold, here's Mrs. Hammond at last!"

The manager led them through the hall himself and pressed the elevator-bell. Hammond knew there were business pals of his sitting at the little hall tables having a drink before dinner. But he wasn't going to risk interruption; he looked neither to the right nor the left. They could think what they pleased. If they didn't understand, the more fools they--and he stepped out of the lift, unlocked the door of their room, and shepherded Janey in. The door shut. Now, at last, they were alone together. He turned up the light. The curtains were drawn; the fire blazed. He flung his hat on to the huge bed and went towards her.

But--would you believe it!--again they were interrupted. This time it was the man with the luggage. He made two journeys of it, leaving the door open in between, taking his time, whistling through his teeth in the corridor. Hammond paced up and down the room, tearing off his gloves, tearing off his scarf. Finally he flung his coat on to the bedside.

At last the fool was gone. The door clicked. Now they were alone. Said Hammond: "I feel I'll never have you to myself again. These cursed people! Janey"--and he bent his flushed, eager gaze upon her--"let's have dinner up here. If we go down to the restaurant we'll be interrupted, and then there's the annoying music" (the music he'd praised so highly, applauded so loudly last night!). "We shan't be able to hear each other speak. Let's have something up here in front of the fire. It's too late for tea. I'll order a little supper, shall I? How

does that idea strike you?"

"Do, darling!" said Janey. "And while you're away--the children's letters--"

"Oh, later on will do!" said Hammond.

"But then we'd get it over," said Janey. "And I'd first have time to--"

"Oh, I needn't go down!" explained Hammond. "I'll just ring and give the order... you don't want to send me away, do you?"

Janey shook her head and smiled.

"But you're thinking of something else. You're worrying about something," said Hammond. "What is it? Come and sit here--come and sit on my knee before the fire."

"I'll just take off my hat," said Janey, and she went over to the dressing-table. "A-ah!" She gave a little cry.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, darling. I've just found the children's letters. That's all right! They will keep. No hurry now!" She turned to him, clasping them. She tucked them into her blouse. She cried quickly, gaily: "Oh, how typical this dressing-table is of you!"

"Why? What's the matter with it?" said Hammond.

"If it were floating in space I should say 'John!'" laughed Janey, staring at the big bottle of hair stuff, the bottle of eau-de-Cologne, the two hair-brushes, and a dozen new collars tied with pink tape. "Is this all your luggage?"

"Hang my luggage!" said Hammond; but all the same he liked being laughed at by Janey. "Let's talk. Let's get down to things. Tell me"--and as

Janey perched on his knees he leaned back and drew her into the deep, ugly chair--"tell me you're really glad to be back, Janey."

"Yes, darling, I am glad," she said.

But just as when he embraced her he felt she would fly away, so Hammond never knew--never knew for dead certain that she was as glad as he was. How could he know? Would he ever know? Would he always have this desire--this hunger, somehow, to make Janey so much part of him that there wasn't any of her to escape? He wanted to block out everybody, everything. He wished now he'd turned off the light. That might have brought her nearer. And now those letters from the children, in her blouse. He could have chucked them into the fire.

"Janey," he whispered.

"Yes, dear?" She lay on his breast, but so lightly, so remotely. Their breathing rose and fell together.

"Janey!"

"What is it?"

"Turn to me," he whispered. A slow, deep flush flowed into his forehead.
"Kiss me, Janey! You kiss me!"

It seemed to him there was a tiny pause--but long enough for him to suffer torture--before her lips touched his, firmly, lightly--kissing them as she always kissed him, as though the kiss--how could he describe it?--confirmed what they were saying, signed the contract. But that wasn't what he wanted; that wasn't at all what he thirsted for. He felt suddenly, horrible tired.

"If you knew," he said, opening his eyes, "what it's been like--waiting to-day. I thought the boat never would come in. There we were, hanging about. What kept you so long?"

She made no answer. She was looking away from him at the fire. The flames hurried--hurried over the coals, flickered, fell.

"Not asleep, are you?" said Hammond, and he jumped her up and down.

"No," she said. And then: "Don't do that, dear. No, I was thinking. As a matter of fact," she said, "one of the passengers died last night--a man. That's what held us up. We brought him in--I mean, he wasn't buried at sea. So, of course, the ship's doctor and the shore doctor--"

"What was it?" asked Hammond uneasily. He hated to hear of death. He hated this to have happened. It was, in some strange way, as though he and Janey had met a funeral on their way to the hotel.

"Oh, it wasn't anything in the least infectious!" said Janey. She was speaking scarcely above her breath. "It was heart." A pause. "Poor fellow!" she said. "Quite young." And she watched the fire flicker and fall. "He died in my arms," said Janey.

The blow was so sudden that Hammond thought he would faint. He couldn't move; he couldn't breathe. He felt all his strength flowing--flowing into the big dark chair, and the big dark chair held him fast, gripped him, forced him to bear it.

"What?" he said dully. "What's that you say?"

"The end was quite peaceful," said the small voice. "He just"--and Hammond saw her lift her gentle hand--"breathed his life away at the end." And her hand fell.

"Who--else was there?" Hammond managed to ask.

"Nobody. I was alone with him."

Ah, my God, what was she saying! What was she doing to him! This would kill him! And all the while she spoke:

"I saw the change coming and I sent the steward for the doctor, but the doctor was too late. He couldn't have done anything, anyway."

"But--why you, why you?" moaned Hammond.

At that Janey turned quickly, quickly searched his face.

"You don't mind, John, do you?" she asked. "You don't--It's nothing to do with you and me."

Somehow or other he managed to shake some sort of smile at her. Somehow or other he said: "No--go--on, go on! I want you to tell me."

"But, John darling--"

"Tell me, Janey!"

"There's nothing to tell," she said, wondering. "He was one of the first-class passengers. I saw he was very ill when he came on board... But he seemed to be so much better until yesterday. He had a severe attack in the afternoon--excitement--nervousness, I think, about arriving. And after that he never recovered."

"But why didn't the stewardess--"

"Oh, my dear--the stewardess!" said Janey. "What would he have felt? And besides... he might have wanted to leave a message... to--"

"Didn't he?" muttered Hammond. "Didn't he say anything?"

"No, darling, not a word!" She shook her head softly. "All the time I was with him he was too weak... he was too weak even to move a finger... "

Janey was silent. But her words, so light, so soft, so chill, seemed to hover in the air, to rain into his breast like snow.

The fire had gone red. Now it fell in with a sharp sound and the room was colder. Cold crept up his arms. The room was huge, immense, glittering. It filled his whole world. There was the great blind bed, with his coat flung across it like some headless man saying his prayers. There was the luggage, ready to be carried away again, anywhere, tossed into trains, carted on to boats.

... "He was too weak. He was too weak to move a finger." And yet he died in Janey's arms. She--who'd never--never once in all these years--never on one single solitary occasion--

No; he mustn't think of it. Madness lay in thinking of it. No, he wouldn't face it. He couldn't stand it. It was too much to bear!

And now Janey touched his tie with her fingers. She pinched the edges of the tie together.

"You're not--sorry I told you, John darling? It hasn't made you sad? It

hasn't spoiled our evening--our being alone together?"

But at that he had to hide his face. He put his face against her and his arms held her.

Spoilt their evening! Spoilt their being alone together! They would never be alone together again.