The Hands at Hext's Elbow

The moor road near Postbridge, Dartmoor — a foggy October night in 1926, with a charabanc due over the hill at midnight.

POSTBRIDGE, DARTMOOR, DEVON, ENGLAND · 3-5 PLAYERS · ABOUT 4 HOURS · 1920S (OCTOBER 1926)

BUILT ON THE LEGEND OF: THE HAIRY HANDS OF THE POSTBRIDGE ROAD (REPORTS FROM THE 1910S AND 1920S)

Game master's eyes only. Everything the players may see is in the separate Player Pack.

System-neutral. Difficulty is given in plain words (easy / hard / very hard) for you to map to the rules you play. The legend is real and cited; the adventure built on it is original fiction.

The legend as it is told

On Dartmoor there is a lonely stretch of road between Postbridge and Two Bridges, the road now numbered the B3212. From around 1910, drivers and cyclists on it began to report accidents that made no sense. The motor jolted or the handlebars twisted, and the machine went off the road as if something had taken hold of the wheel.

Some of them said exactly that. A pair of large, hairy hands appeared from nowhere, gripped the steering wheel or the handlebars and forced them off the road. Others said the hands could not be seen at all, only felt. Most of those people ran into the verge and walked away.

In the summer of 1921 there was a fatal accident on the road, then a coach accident that threw its passengers from their seats, and then an army captain who said invisible hands had forced his motorcycle into the verge. After that the London newspapers took the story up and the whole country heard of the Hairy Hands.

Not every story involves a vehicle. In 1924 a woman camping on the moor with her husband said she saw a hairy hand creeping up the window of their caravan in the night, and that it drew back and was gone.

Sceptics blamed strangers driving too fast on narrow roads between high walls. When the road was investigated, the steep camber of its surface was judged the likely cause of the accidents and was altered. Local tellings rarely say whose hands they are. A few say they belonged to a man who died on that road.

Where the legend comes from

Hairy Hands — the road near Postbridge, the reports from about 1910, the summer of 1921 and the press coverage, the 1924 caravan, and the camber explanation
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hairy_Hands`

Postbridge — the village on the East Dart and its clapper bridge
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postbridge`

Dartmoor — the moor itself: tors, granite, blanket bog and fog
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dartmoor`

Content notes

- Motor accidents and near-misses (no one dies during play)
- Unseen hands grabbing at people in the dark
- A road at night in fog, with a vehicle full of people in danger
- No harm to children at any point

Behind the screen

> **PREMISE**
>
> Something takes hold of the wheel on Hext's Elbow, the walled double bend below Wennaford Tor, and since spring it has been getting stronger. At midnight the harvest-supper charabanc from Princetown will come over the hill with twenty people aboard and a driver who takes the Elbow fast. The characters have until then to find out what the moor wants.

What is really going on

For three hundred years a tall granite boundary stone called the Wennaford Mark stood on the outside of the Elbow. It was carved with an open hand and it marked the edge of the old packhorse way. The moor people had a bargain with it: 'keep the Mark on your right hand and the moor keeps its hands to itself.' Last April the county paid the haulier Samuel Pengelly to widen and resurface the road. To save the price of quarry stone, Pengelly had his ganger Reuben Stook break the Mark up with sledgehammers and bed

the pieces under the new raised outer edge of the Elbow.

That gave the bend a steep camber that tips every car toward the wall. It also broke the bargain. Since then the hands have taken hold at the Elbow every foggy night, stronger each month. They are not quite cruel. They pull travellers back toward where the old way ran, but a charabanc on that camber will roll. The hands let go when the Mark stands again. Reuben kept the carved capstone with the hand on it, and it is under his bed. Raise it upright at the Elbow and the hands stop. Digging the rest of the stone out of the road edge also lays the camber flatter, and that is the only thing the constable will ever write down.

The clue graph

The hands only take hold at the Elbow, and only since last spring
Routes: Kitty Mudge has been grabbed twice, both times on the Elbow and both since May / Constable Lethbridge's notebook lists every incident, and all of them are on the one bend (Handout 2) / Loveday Hext says forty years of carts went round the Elbow without trouble 'until they mended it'
Leads to: Scene 2 !’ what changed on the Elbow

A carved stone called the Mark stood at the Elbow and is gone
Routes: The old rhyme Loveday says over the bar (Handout 1) / Violet Ashby's sketchbook from the summer of 1925 shows a tall stone at the bend, carved with an open hand / Reuben Stook, if he's asked what used to stand on the bend, goes white
Leads to: Scene 2 !’ where the stone went

Pengelly broke the Mark up and put it under the road
Routes: Reuben confesses if he's treated kindly or shown the sketch / Pengelly's account book bills the county for quarry stone he never bought / Fresh-broken granite with chisel marks shows in the outer edge of the Elbow when a lantern is held low
Leads to: Scene 3 !’ dig it out

The capstone with the carved hand survived
Routes: Reuben keeps it wrapped in sacking under his bed in the roadmen's hut / Violet's sketch of the hand at her caravan window has the same open-palm shape as the carving / Kitty saw Reuben carry something heavy into his hut the day the Mark was broken
Leads to: Scene 3 !’ raise the Mark

Pacing for one evening

0:00 Hook, the car in the verge, Kitty and the constable arrive

0:30 The bend: the camber, the pale new stone, the first touch

1:00 The Drift Inn: Loveday's rhyme and the charabanc notice

1:40 Violet's caravan and her sketchbooks

2:20 Pengelly's books and Reuben's confession; the capstone under the bed

3:00 Back to the Elbow with the stone; the hands come out of the fog

3:40 The charabanc on the hill, the Mark raised or the road walked

SCENE 1 — HEXT'S ELBOW, THE WALLED DOUBLE BEND BELOW WENNAFORD TOR, AT DUSK

Off the Road at the Elbow

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The engine ticks as it cools. Fog lies between the high walls like milk in a bowl. The road tilts under your boots toward the outer wall, more than a road should. From the verge where your front wheels ended up, you can see two long scrapes in the turf, and neither of them was made by your car.*

The party's car is nose-down in the verge with the fog thickening around it. Within minutes two others arrive. Kitty Mudge brings the post-van round the bend at a crawl, with both hands locked on the wheel. Constable Arthur Lethbridge comes up on his bicycle with a spirit level and a notebook to measure the road, 'again'. Whatever took hold of the car is still here. Anyone who lays a hand on a wheel, a bicycle or a pram handle on this bend feels it tug.

If they…

Examine the car and the road where it left the road — The steering is sound. The road's outer edge is new, raised and steep, and the freshly broken granite in it is paler than the old moor stone. Anyone who crouches with a lantern feels a hand close gently around their wrist before it lets go. That's hard to shrug off, and easy to remember.

Accept a lift in Kitty's post-van to the Drift Inn — Kitty drives with her jaw set. On the second half of the bend the wheel is wrenched left and she and a passenger have to fight it together. Holding it is hard. She tells them this is the third time and that 'nobody at the inn will say it out loud'.

Walk the bend with Constable Lethbridge while he measures — He lays his spirit level on the edge and swears quietly. It's 'one in six, and it was near flat when I came here'. He is sure it's the camber, and he wants a witness who will say so. If they're sharp, they see his hand shake on the level.

Clues here

- The hands only take hold at the Elbow
- Fresh-broken granite in the new road edge

> DIFFICULTY
>
> Getting the car out of the verge tonight is very hard, and pointless in the fog. Noticing that the new edge is made of a different stone is easy with a lantern and hard without one.

SCENE 2 — THE DRIFT INN, PENGELLY'S HAULAGE YARD, THE ROADMEN'S HUT AND VIOLET ASHBY'S CARAVAN

What the Road Is Made Of

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The Drift Inn smells of peat smoke and wet wool. There's a printed notice pinned by the dead telephone: HARVEST SUPPER, PRINCETOWN, CHARABANC RETURNS 12 O'CLOCK. Under it, in pencil, someone has written 'mind the Elbow, Percy'.*

These can be taken in any order. At the Drift Inn, Loveday Hext has a fire, a telephone that's been dead since the fog came down, and the harvest-supper notice on the wall: 'Charabanc returns from Princetown 12 o'clock'. Up past the bridge, Samuel Pengelly is doing his accounts in the yard office. The roadmen's hut by the bend is lit, and old Reuben Stook is inside, rubbing his aching hands. Down by the stream, the painter Violet Ashby is sitting up in her caravan with the lamp turned high, because last week something tried her window.

If they…

Ask Loveday Hext about the bend — She gives them the old rhyme (Handout 1) and says the Mark stood on the Elbow all her life, 'with its hand held up like a man stopping traffic'. It was gone after the road was mended, and she never asked where. She'd sooner the charabanc was stopped than anything.

Call on Violet Ashby at her caravan — She's relieved to have company. She shows them last week's sketch of the hand at her window, and her 1925 sketchbook with the Mark standing on the bend. The open palm carved on the stone matches the hand. She comes along if invited.

Press Pengelly in his office, or get a look at his books — Pressing him to his face is hard. He's bluff, busy and insulted. His account book is easy to read once he steps out: the county paid for forty tons of quarry stone and no quarry was paid. Cornered with the book, he blames Reuben.

Knock on the roadmen's hut — Reuben Stook sits with his hands in a bowl of warm water. Threats get nothing. Kindness, or the sketch, gets everything: he broke the Mark because he was told to, it has 'had my hands ever since', and the capstone with the carving is under his bed. It's heavy, so it needs two people and a barrow.

Clues here

- A carved stone called the Mark stood at the Elbow
- Pengelly broke the Mark up and put it under the road
- The capstone with the carved hand survived
- The charabanc comes over the Elbow at midnight

> DIFFICULTY
>
> Getting Reuben to talk is easy with kindness and very hard with threats. Getting the capstone to the bend in the fog is hard: it's heavy and the barrow wants to run toward the wall.

SCENE 3 — HEXT'S ELBOW, FROM HALF PAST ELEVEN TO MIDNIGHT

Midnight at the Elbow

> READ ALOUD
>
> *Up on the hill two yellow lamps swing through the fog, and a whole charabanc is singing 'Widecombe Fair' at the top of its voice. Down here on the bend it's very quiet. Then, all along the new stone edge, the fog begins to move as if a great many hands were feeling their way along it.*

The fog is thicker now, and the hands are no longer only on the road. They grip the barrow, the handlebars of Lethbridge's bicycle, a lantern's bail and a boot's laces. Up on the hill the charabanc's headlamps come and go through the fog, and the singing aboard carries a long way. Percy Hannaford always takes the Elbow fast. The party has perhaps twenty minutes. Any one of these works, and together they make the best ending.

If they…

Raise the capstone upright on the outside of the bend — Two or three people have to lever it up and pack it with stones while the hands pull at their sleeves. That's hard, and easy with Reuben's help. When the carved palm faces the road, the tugging stops mid-grip. The fog on the bend goes still, and the charabanc comes round singing.

Stop the charabanc before it reaches the bend — Someone has to run up the hill with a lantern, and something wants that lantern. Waving Percy down is easy if they get there. Talking him into walking his passengers round the bend on foot is hard, and easy if Loveday or the constable is with them. Everyone lives, but the hands are still here tomorrow.

Dig the broken Mark out of the road edge with the roadmen's tools — It's very hard in twenty minutes. Every piece that comes out lowers the camber a little and makes the tugging a little weaker. It won't be finished tonight, but it gives the constable the camber report he wanted and turns Pengelly's own road against him.

Clues here

- The carved palm facing the road makes the hands let go

> DIFFICULTY
>
> Raising the capstone is hard, and easy with three people and Reuben. Holding a lantern against the hands is hard. Stopping Percy is easy once you're standing in front of him.

The ending

At midnight the charabanc comes over the hill. The characters either get the Mark back up so the moor lets go, or they get twenty people round the Elbow on their own feet. In the morning the fog lifts off an ordinary road, and the county, the constable and Pengelly all have something to answer for.

If the capstone was raised and the charabanc came round safely: The best ending. The hands never take hold on the Elbow again. The county quietly lowers the camber the next spring, and Lethbridge writes 'road surface' in his report and 'the Mark' in his pocketbook.

If the charabanc was stopped but the Mark wasn't raised: Everyone walks home singing, but the hands are still on the Elbow. Loveday closes the road with a rope and a lantern each foggy night until someone finishes the job, which is a hook for a second session.

If Pengelly was exposed with his account book: The county wants its money back and Pengelly wants someone to blame. Reuben needs a friend at the inquiry, and the party is the obvious choice.

If someone was dragged off the road by the hands: They wake in the heather on the old packhorse way, twenty yards off the road, unhurt and cold, with the print of a large palm on their wrist that fades by breakfast.

When the table goes sideways

The party bypasses Reuben's hut entirely: At half past eleven Reuben comes down the road on his own with the capstone in a barrow, because he can't bear it any more. Now he needs help getting it to the bend.

The party misses the clue that the Mark ever stood there: Violet walks into the inn to buy candles and drops her sketchbook open at the 1925 drawing of the bend.

The party splits up: Split along the two jobs. One group goes up the hill to stop the charabanc and the other brings the stone to the bend. Cut between them every ten minutes, and at midnight let both groups hear the same singing.

They try to fight the hands: Fire makes them let go of one person for a moment, but there are always more of them in the fog. Show the players that the hands follow the new stone edge and never cross the old line of the verge.

Difficulty for any system

Easy: Anyone competent succeeds; roll only if failure is interesting.

Hard: A trained or well-equipped character usually succeeds; others need help.

Very hard: Only with a clever plan, the right tools or a great deal of luck.

Easy means no roll or a small bonus, hard is your system's standard test, and very hard is your hardest test or needs a clever plan first.

The cast

Kitty Mudge
DRIVES THE POSTBRIDGE POST-VAN, 23

Leather coat too big for her, goggles pushed up, oil on her cuffs
Wants: To prove to her father it isn't her driving
Secret: She saw Reuben carry something heavy into his hut the day the Mark was broken, and she never mentioned it
Voice: Quick and dry, and she makes a joke of anything that frightens her
Knows: The hands only take hold on the Elbow, and only since May

Constable Arthur Lethbridge
VILLAGE CONSTABLE, MEASURING THE ROAD

Cape dripping with fog, a spirit level under one arm, a pocketbook in his fist
Wants: A report that says 'camber' and nothing else
Secret: In July the hands took his handlebars, and he left it out of his own notebook
Voice: Slow and careful, and he writes down everything anyone says
Knows: Every incident on the bend this year; the camber is new since the road was mended

Loveday Hext
LANDLADY OF THE DRIFT INN

Broad, floury apron, keys at her belt, peat smoke in her hair
Wants: The charabanc home safe and her regulars back
Secret: She has put a lantern on the bend every foggy night since June, and the hands have never touched it
Voice: Warm Devon, and she calls everyone 'my 'andsome' until she's cross
Knows: The old rhyme; the Mark stood on the Elbow all her life

Samuel Pengelly
HAULIER AND THE COUNTY'S ROAD CONTRACTOR

Gaiters, a gold watch-chain, a pencil behind his ear
Wants: His contract renewed and no questions
Secret: He billed the county for forty tons of quarry stone and used the broken Mark instead
Voice: Loud and friendly, and every sentence has a price in it
Knows: Where every piece of the Mark went; he gave the order

Reuben Stook
OLD ROAD GANGER

Huge hands, swollen at the knuckles, soaking in a bowl of warm water
Wants: To be forgiven, by somebody
Secret: He swung the hammer on the Mark and kept the carved capstone under his bed
Voice: Soft, slow, and he keeps looking at his hands
Knows: The capstone is in his hut; which pieces went where in the road edge

Violet Ashby PAINTER CAMPING IN A CARAVAN BY THE STREAM
Paint on her fingers, a man's tweed jacket, a sketchbook always open
Wants: To paint the moor at night, and not to be laughed at
Secret: She has come three summers running, and her old sketchbooks are the only picture of the Mark that exists
Voice: Bright and precise, and she describes everything in colours
Knows: What the Mark looked like; the hand at her window matches its carving

Handouts — when to use them

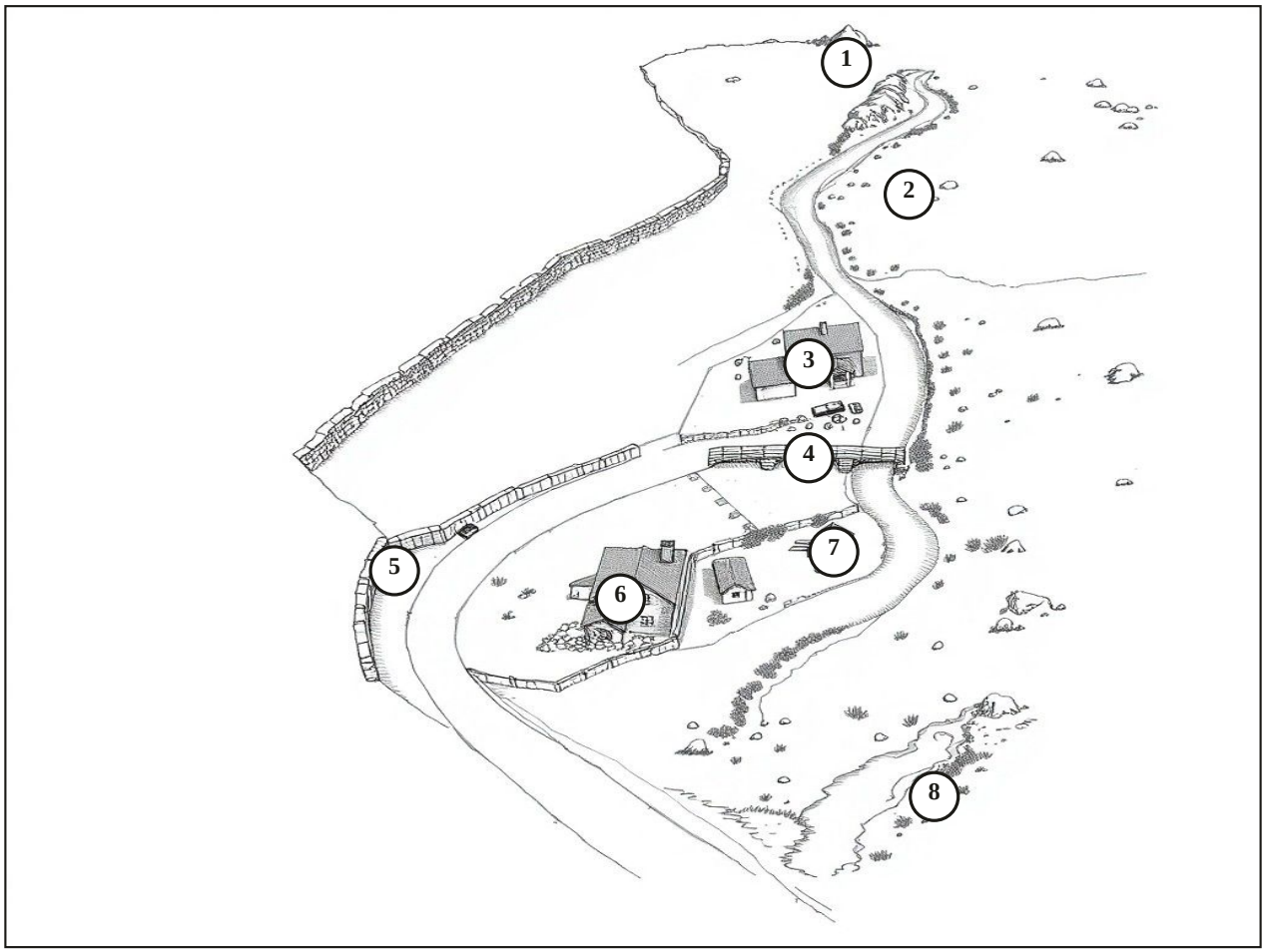
Handout 1, The Mark at the Elbow: Loveday gives it at the Drift Inn in Scene 2, or Kitty half-remembers it on the drive. It holds the whole solution: the Mark kept the bargain, and 'the hand stands up on the road again' means raising the carved capstone.

Handout 2, Constable Lethbridge's Pocketbook: Lethbridge shows it in Scene 1 if he's handled with respect, or leaves it on the Drift Inn bar. It pins every incident to the one bend, dates the trouble to the road works and points at the missing stone. He left out his own July incident.

MAP — GM VERSION

Hext's Elbow below Wennaford Tor

The walled double bend, the Drift Inn, the bridge, Pengelly's yard, the roadmen's hut and the stream, drawn for play.



SCHEMATIC — NOT TO SCALE, NOT A SURVEY

1. Wennaford Tor From the top the charabanc's lamps can be seen ten minutes before they reach the bend.

2. The road to Postbridge The charabanc comes down this way at midnight. Stop it here and nobody is in danger.

3. Pengelly's yard Scene 2. The account book with the unpaid quarry stone is in the office.

4. Wennaford bridge It's safe, because the hands never reach past the old verge line.

5. Hext's Elbow Scenes 1 and 3. The broken Mark is under the new outer edge. Raise the capstone here.

6. The Drift Inn Scene 2. Loveday, the rhyme, the dead telephone and the charabanc notice.

7. The roadmen's hut Reuben Stook lives here, and the carved capstone is under his bed.

8. The stream and Violet's caravan Violet camps here. She has the sketchbooks, and the hand came to her window.

* * *

THE MARK AT THE ELBOW

Up Wennaford way where the walls lean in,
the road turns twice and the fog comes thin;
keep the Mark on your right-hand side
and the moor keeps its hands to itself, and wide.

But take the Mark and break the line,
and the moor will reach for what was mine;
it will have the wheel and it will have the rein,
till the hand stands up on the road again.

Printed for the hawkers of the parish, and sold for a penny.

CONSTABLE LETHBRIDGE'S POCKETBOOK

No.	Entry	Hand
1	*Hext's Elbow, below Wennaford Tor. Incidents since road mended (April):*	
2	*9 May. Post-van (Miss K. Mudge) into near verge. Driver unhurt. States 'the wheel was took'.*	
3	*23 June. Motor-bicycle, visitor from Plymouth, into verge. Unhurt. Would not give statement.*	
4	*14 Aug. Pony and trap, Mr W. Coaker's man. Pony bolted on bend. 'Something at the bridle.'*	
5	*2 Sept. Post-van (Miss K. Mudge) again. Unhurt. Same statement.*	
6	*19 Sept. Touring car, gentleman from London. 'Hands.' Lodged at Drift Inn.*	
7	*Camber at outer edge: 1 in 6. Before mending: near level.*	
8	*Note: the old stone at the bend not replaced after works. Ask the county.*	
9	*Note: fresh stone in outer edge is not quarry stone.*	