

## Chapter 1 The Strange Man's Arrival

The stranger came early one winter's day in February, through a biting wind and the last snowfall of the year. He walked over the hill from Bramblehurst Station, and carried a little black bag in his thickly gloved hand. He was wrapped up from head to foot, and the edge of his soft grey hat hid every part of his face except the shiny point of his nose; the snow had piled itself against his shoulders and chest. He almost fell into the Coach and Horses, more dead than alive, and threw his bag down. 'A fire,' he cried, 'in the name of human kindness! A room and a fire!' He stamped his feet, shook the snow from his coat and followed Mrs Hall, the innkeeper's wife, into her parlour. There he arranged to take a room in the inn and gave her two pounds.

Mrs Hall lit the fire and left him there while she went to prepare him a meal with her own hands. To have a guest at Iping in the winter time was an unusual piece of good fortune, and she was determined to show that she deserved it.

She put some meat on the fire to cook, told Millie, the servant, to get the room ready for the stranger, and carried the cloth, plates and glasses into the parlour, and began to lay the table. Although the fire was burning brightly, she was surprised to see that her visitor still wore his hat and coat, and stood with his back to her, looking out of the window at the falling snow in the yard.

His gloved hands were held behind him, and he seemed to be thinking deeply. She noticed that some melted snow was falling onto the floor from his shoulders.

'Can I take your hat and coat, sir,' she said, 'and dry them in the kitchen?'

'No,' he replied, without turning.

She was not sure that she had heard him, and was about to repeat the question.

He turned his head and looked at her over his shoulder. 'I would rather keep them on,' he said firmly; and she noticed that he wore big blue glasses, and had a bushy beard over his coat collar that almost hid his face.

'Very well, sir,' she said. 'As you like. Very soon the room will be warmer.'

He made no answer, and turned his face away from her again, and Mrs Hall, feeling that her talk was unwelcome, finished laying the table quickly, and hurried out of the room. When she returned he was still standing there like a man of stone, his collar turned up, the edge of his hat turned down, almost hiding his face and ears. She put down the eggs and meat noisily, and called rather than said to him:

'Your lunch is served, sir.'

'Thank you,' he answered. He did not move until she was closing the door. Then he turned round and walked eagerly up to the table.

Mrs Hall filled the butter dish in the kitchen, and took it to the parlour.

She knocked and entered at once. As she did so her visitor moved quickly, so that she only saw something white disappearing behind the table. He seemed to be picking up something from the floor. She put down the butter dish on the table, and noticed that the visitor's hat and coat were hanging over a chair in front of the fire.

'I suppose I may have them to dry now?' she said, in a voice that could not be refused.

'Leave the hat,' said her visitor, and turning, she saw he had raised his head and was looking at her.

For a moment she stood looking at him, too surprised to speak.

He held his napkin over the lower part of his face, so that his mouth and jaws were completely hidden. But it was not that which surprised Mrs Hall. It was the fact that the top of his head above his blue glasses was covered by a white bandage, and that another covered his ears, leaving nothing of his face to be seen except his pink, pointed nose. It was bright pink, and shining, just as it had been at first. He wore a dark brown jacket, with a high black collar turned up about his neck. His thick black hair stuck out below and between the bandages. This bandaged head was so unlike what she had expected that for a moment she stood staring at it.

He did not remove the napkin, but remained holding it, as she saw now, with a brown-gloved hand, and looking at her from behind his dark glasses.

‘Leave the hat,’ he said, through the white cloth.

She began to feel less afraid. She put the hat on the chair again by the fire.

‘I didn’t know, sir,’ she began, ‘that—’ And she stopped.

‘Thank you,’ he said shortly, looking from her to the door, and then at her again.

‘I’ll have it nicely dried, sir, at once,’ she said, and carried his coat out of the room. She looked at his bandaged head and dark glasses again as she was going out of the door; but he was still holding his napkin in front of his face. She was shaking a little as she closed the door behind her. ‘My goodness!’ she whispered. She went straight to the kitchen, and did not even think of asking Millie what she was doing now.

The visitor sat and listened to her footsteps. He looked out of the window before he removed his napkin from his face and began his meal again. He took a mouthful, looked again at the window, then rose and, taking the napkin in his hand, walked across the room and pulled down the blind. This darkened the room. He returned more happily to the table and his meal.

‘The poor man’s had an accident, or an operation or something,’ said Mrs Hall. ‘What a shock those bandages gave me.’

She put some more coal on the fire, and hung the traveller’s coat to dry. ‘And the glasses! Why, he doesn’t look human at all. And holding that napkin over his mouth all the time. Talking through it! . . . Perhaps his mouth was hurt too.’

She turned round, suddenly remembering something. ‘Oh dear!’ she said, ‘Haven’t you done those potatoes yet, Millie?’

When Mrs Hall went to clear away the stranger’s lunch, her idea that his mouth must also have been damaged in an accident was strengthened, for though he was smoking a pipe, all the time that she was in the room he kept the lower part of his face covered. He sat in the corner with his back to the window, and spoke now, having eaten and drunk and being comfortably warmed through, less impatiently than before. The light of the fire shone red in his glasses.

‘I have some boxes,’ he said, ‘at Bramblehurst Station. How can they be brought here?’

Mrs Hall answered his question, and then said, ‘It’s a steep road by the hill, sir. That’s where a carriage was turned over, a year ago and more. A gentleman was killed. Accidents, sir, happen in a moment, don’t they?’

‘They do.’

‘But people take long enough to get well, sir, don’t they? There was my sister’s son, Tom, who cut his arm with a scythe – he fell on it out in the fields. He was three months tied up, sir. You’d hardly believe it. I’ve been afraid of scythes ever since, sir.’

‘I can quite understand that,’ said the visitor.

‘We were afraid that he’d have to have an operation, he was so bad, sir.’

The visitor laughed suddenly.

‘Was he?’

‘He was, sir. And it wasn’t funny for those who had to nurse him as I did, my sister being so busy with her little ones. There were bandages to do, sir, and bandages to undo. So that if I may say, sir—’

‘Will you get me some matches?’ said the visitor quite suddenly. ‘My pipe is out.’

Mrs Hall stopped. It was certainly rude of him after she had told him so much. But she remembered the two pounds, and went for the matches.

‘Thanks,’ he said shortly, as she put them down, and turned his back upon her and looked out of the window again. Clearly he did not like talking about bandages.

The visitor remained in the room until four o’clock, without giving Mrs Hall an excuse for a visit. He was very quiet during that time: perhaps he sat in the growing darkness smoking by the firelight – perhaps he slept.

Once or twice a listener might have heard him: for five minutes he could be heard walking up and down the room. He seemed to be talking to himself. Then he sat down again in the armchair.

## **Chapter 2 Mr Henfrey Has a Shock**

At four o’clock, when it was fairly dark, and Mrs Hall was trying to find the courage to go in and ask her visitor if he would like some tea, Teddy Henfrey, the clock-mender, came into the bar.

‘Good evening, Mrs Hall,’ said he, ‘this is terrible snowy weather for thin boots!’

Mrs Hall agreed, and then noticed he had his bag with him. ‘Now you’re here, Mr Teddy,’ said she, ‘I’d be glad if you’d look at the old clock. It’s going, and it strikes loud and clear, but the hour hand does nothing except point to six.’