



Chapter I

THE STRANGE MAN'S ARRIVAL

THE STRANGER came early in February, through a biting wind and a driving snow, carrying a little black wallet in his gloved hand. He was wrapped up from head to foot, and the brim of his hat hid every inch of his face but the shiny tip of his nose.¹ He came into the “Coach and Horses”², and flung his wallet down. “A fire,” he cried, “A room and a fire!” He followed Mrs. Hall into her guest parlour. And with that much introduction and a couple of sovereigns flung upon the table, he took up his room in the inn.

Mrs. Hall lit the fire and went to prepare a meal. A guest at Iping in the winter-time was

¹ but the shiny tip of his nose – *окрім самого кінчика його носа*

² Coach and Horses ['kəʊtʃ ənd 'hɔ:sɪz] – *буков. Екіпаж і коні*

an unheard-of piece of luck and she wanted to show herself worthy of her good fortune. As soon as the bacon was well, and Millie, her slow aid, had been brisked up a bit by a few expressions of contempt, she carried the cloth, plates, and glasses into the parlour and began to lay them. She was surprised to see that her visitor still wore his hat and coat. His gloved hands were clasped behind him, and he was lost in thought. She noticed that the melted snow dripped upon her carpet. "Can I take your hat and coat and dry them in the kitchen?"

"No. I prefer to keep them on," he said, and she noticed that he wore big blue spectacles and had a bushy side-whisker over his coat-collar that completely hid his face.

"As you like. In a bit the room will be warmer."

Mrs. Hall, feeling that her conversational advances were **ill-timed**³, left the room. She put down the eggs and bacon and said to him, "Your lunch is served, sir."

"Thank you," he said. As she went behind the bar she heard a sound of a spoon repeated at regular intervals. She had laid the table and done everything, while Millie had only delayed the mustard. Then she filled the mustard pot and carried it into the parlour.

She rapped and entered promptly. As she did so her visitor moved quickly, so that she saw a white object disappearing behind the table. She rapped down the mustard pot on the table, and

³ ill-timed – невчасний

then she noticed the overcoat and hat had been taken off and put over a chair. She went to these things resolutely. "I suppose I may have them to dry now," she said.

"Leave the hat," said her visitor in a muffled voice.

He held a white serviette over the lower part of his face, so that his mouth and jaws were hidden. Mrs. Hall was startled that all his forehead above his glasses was covered by a white bandage, and that another covered his ears, leaving not a scrap of his face exposed excepting only his nose. It was bright pink. He wore a dark jacket with a high black linen lined collar turned up about his neck. The thick black hair, escaping below and between the cross bandages, projected in curious tails and horns, giving him very strange appearance. This head was so unlike what she had anticipated, that for a moment she stood still.

She placed the hat on the chair again. "I didn't know, sir, that —" and she stopped.

"I'll have them nicely dried, sir." She glanced at his head and blue goggles; but his napkin was still in front of his face. Her face was eloquent of her surprise and perplexity.

The visitor sat and listened to her retreating feet. He glanced at the window before he removed his serviette and resumed his meal. He pulled the blind down to the top of the white muslin. This left the room in twilight. Then he returned to the table and his meal.

"The poor soul's had an accident or an operation," said Mrs. Hall. "And the goggles! He looked more like a diving helmet than a human man! And holding that handkerchief over his mouth all the time. Perhaps his mouth was hurt too."

Mrs. Hall went to clear away the stranger's lunch. She supposed he had suffered an accident. Her idea about his disfigured mouth was confirmed, for he was smoking a pipe, and all the time that she was in the room he never loosened the silk muffler he had wrapped round the lower part of his face. He spoke now with less aggressive brevity than before.

"I have some luggage," he said, "at Bramblehurst station," and he asked her how he could have it sent. "To-morrow!" she said. "There is no speedier delivery?" "No." Was she quite sure? No man with a trap⁴ who would go over?

Mrs. Hall answered his questions and developed a conversation. "It's a steep road, sir," she said. "It happened that a carriage was upsettled, a year ago and more. A gentleman killed, besides his coachman. Accidents, sir, happen in a moment, don't they?"

"They do," he said through his muffler.

"But they take long enough to get well, sir, don't they? There was my sister's son, Tom, he cut his arm with a scythe⁵, and he was three months tied up, sir.

⁴ trap [træp] *n* двоколка, бричка

⁵ scythe [saið] *n* коса