

## **Brush with a Stranger Part 1 - The Stranger**

The year is 1880 and it's Christmas Eve...snow is falling heavily, forming a white blanket over the tiny hamlet of Church Minshull.

The little village is bright with oil lamps and candles, creating coloured Christmas lights. But Samuel Brereton did not see them. He was leaning over the limestone walls of Minshull bridge, staring down moodily at the black water of the River Weaver. The current eddied and swirled like liquid glass, and occasionally a bit of ice, detached from the shore, would go gliding downstream to be swallowed up in the shadows under the bridge.

The water looked paralyzingly cold. Samuel wondered how long a man could stay alive in it. The glassy blackness of the Weaver had a strange, hypnotic effect on him. He leaned still farther over the wall... "I wouldn't do that if I were you," a quiet voice beside him said. Samuel turned resentfully to a young man he had never seen before.

He was a slender, fairly short young man whose round cheeks were reddened in the winter air as though they had just been shaved.

"Wouldn't do what?" Samuel asked sullenly.

"What you were thinking of doing."

"How do you know what I was thinking?"

"Oh, we make it our business to know a lot of things," the stranger said easily.

Samuel wondered what the young man's business was. He was a most unremarkable little person, the sort you would pass in a crowd and never notice. Unless you saw his bright blue eyes, that is. You couldn't forget them, for they were the kindest, sharpest eyes you ever saw, although it could be said that nothing else about him was noteworthy.

He wore a moth-eaten old cloth cap, a white muffler around his neck and a dark jacket that was stretched tightly across his half-starved belly. He was carrying a small black satchel. It wasn't a doctor's bag—it was too large for that and not the right shape. It was a tradesman's bag, Samuel decided distastefully. The fellow was probably some sort of peddler he thought, the kind who would go around poking his sharp little nose into other people's affairs.

Samuel hadn't noticed that the snow had suddenly stopped falling

Glancing up appraisingly at the overcast sky, the stranger said, "It'll be nice to have a white Christmas. They're getting scarce these days—but so are a lot of things."

He turned to face Samuel squarely. "You all right now?"

"Of course I'm all right. What made you think I wasn't? ... I —"

Samuel fell silent before the stranger's quiet gaze. The young man shook his head. "You know you shouldn't think of such things—and on Christmas Eve of all times! You've got to consider Anne—and your mother too."

Samuel opened his mouth to ask how this stranger could know his wife's name, but the fellow anticipated him.

"Don't ask me how I know such things. It's my business to know 'em. That's why I came along this way tonight. Lucky I did too."

He glanced down at the dark water and shuddered. "Well, if you know so much about me," Samuel said, "give me just one good reason why I should be alive."

The young man made a queer chuckling sound. "Come, come, it can't be that bad. You've got your job at the post office. And Anne and the kids. You're healthy, young, and—"

"And sick of everything!" Samuel cried. "I'm stuck here in this mudhole for life, doing the same dull work day after day. Other men are leading exciting lives in Crewe and Stoke, but I—well, I'm just a small-town Postmaster that even the army didn't want. I never did anything really useful or interesting, and it looks as if I never will. I might just as well be dead. I might better be dead. Sometimes I wish I were. In fact, I wish I'd never been born!"

The young man stood looking at him in the growing darkness. "What was that you said?" he asked softly.

"I said I wish I'd never been born," Samuel repeated firmly. "And I mean it too."

The stranger's red cheeks glowed with excitement. "Why that's wonderful! You've solved everything. I was afraid you were going to give me some trouble. But now you've got the solution yourself. You wish you'd never been born. All right! OK! ...You haven't!"