

## **Brush with a Stranger Part 2 - Samuel who?**

“What do you mean?” Samuel growled.

“You haven’t been born. Just that. You haven’t been born. No one here knows you. You have no responsibilities—no job —no wife—no children. Why, you haven’t even a mother. You couldn’t have, of course. All your troubles are over. Your wish, I am happy to say, has been granted—officially.”

“You’re crazy!” Samuel snorted and turned away.

The stranger ran after him and caught him by the arm.

“You’d better take this with you,” he said, holding out his satchel. “It’ll open a lot of doors that might otherwise be slammed in your face.”

“What doors... in whose face?” Samuel scoffed. “I know everybody in this village. And besides, I’d like to see anybody slam a door in my face.”

“Yes, I know,” the young man said patiently. “But take this anyway. It can’t do any harm and it may help.”

He opened the satchel and displayed a number of brushes. “You’d be surprised how useful these brushes can be as introduction—especially the free ones. These, I mean.”

He pulled out a plain little hairbrush. “I’ll show you how to use it.” He thrust the satchel into Samuel’s reluctant hands and began: “When the lady of the house comes to the door you give her this and then talk fast. You say: ‘Good evening, Missus. I’m from the Cheshire Brush Company, and I want to present you with this handsome and useful brush absolutely free—no obligation to purchase anything at all.’ After that, of course, it’s easy. Now you try it.”

He forced the brush into Samuel’s hand. Samuel promptly dropped the brush into the satchel and fumbled with the catch, finally closing it with an angry snap. “Here,” he said, and then stopped abruptly, for there was no one in sight.

The young stranger must have somehow slipped away into whiteness of the night, Samuel thought. He certainly wasn’t going to play hide-and-seek with him. It was dark and getting colder every minute. He shivered and turned up his coat collar.

The street lights, having been lit by the local lamplighter, were aglow and Christmas candles in the windows flickered softly. The village looked remarkably cheerful. After all, the place you grew up in was the one spot on earth where you could really feel at home. Samuel felt a sudden burst of affection even for crotchety old Mr Fisher, who lived just behind Lottie Wall’s cottage. Mr Fisher had one leg shorter than the other and was regularly mocked and feared in equal measure by the children of the village.

He remembered the incident he had when his Penny Farthing had scraped a piece of bark out of Reverend Sandford's enormous Copper Beech tree. Samuel looked up at the vast spread of leafless branches towering over him in the darkness. The tree must have been growing there since the Civil War times. He felt a sudden twinge of guilt for the damage he had done. He had never stopped to inspect the wound, for he was ordinarily afraid to have Reverend Sandford catch him even looking at the tree. Now he stepped out boldly into the roadway to examine the huge trunk. The Reverend must have repaired the scar or somehow disguised it, for there was no sign of it.

Samuel struck a match and bent down to look more closely. He straightened up with an odd, sinking feeling in his stomach. There wasn't any scar. The bark was smooth and undamaged. He remembered what the stranger at the bridge had said. It was all nonsense, of course, but the non-existent scar bothered him.

When he reached Old House - the Post Office, he saw that something was wrong. The building was dark, and he knew he had left a lamp lit. He ran around to the front. There was a battered old sign fastened to the wall. Samuel could just make out the words: FOR RENT OR SALE Apply HENRY BROOK ESQ.

Perhaps it was some boys' trick, he thought wildly. Then he saw a pile of ancient leaves and tattered newspapers in the Post Office's ordinarily immaculate gateway. And the windows looked as though they hadn't been washed in years. A light was still burning next door at Job Hesketh's smithy. Samuel dashed over and tore the smithy door open. Job looked up from his forge in surprise. "What might I be able to do for you, young man?" he said in a colloquial voice he reserves for potential customers.

"The Post Office...?," Samuel said breathlessly.

"What be the matter with it?" "You mean, the old Post Office?" Job Hesketh turned around and looked out of the window. "Nothing that I can see... Wouldn't like to rent or buy it, would you?"

"You mean—it's out of business?"