

blazing on his ungloved left hand. It flashed like a great eye of fire as he stood under one of the gas jets and lit a cigar.

"Nasty night, sir," suggested the station-master, rather impressed by the superb stranger. "We shall have it hot and heavy before morning."

The stranger nodded carelessly, blew a fragrant cloud of smoke in the face of the nearest straggler, walked to the door, and looked long and earnestly down the road.

The dull little village—dull at its best and brightest—was unspeakably forlorn and forsaken this black and dismal March evening. Not even a stray dog wandered through its one long, straggling street. Everybody was shut up behind those lighted windows, in square, white dwellings, with the inevitable Venetian blinds—houses as much alike as peas in a pod.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"A gay and festive place, this Framlingham of yours, my friend. Existence dragged out here must be a priceless boon. There's a hotel, I suppose?"

"Five of 'em," replied the station-master, triumphantly. "The Crown, the Farmers, the Wheatsheaf, the——"

"That will do. Which is the best?"

"Well, the Crown is the dearest and the neatest—and a pretty fair hotel. There it stands, sir, with them benches in front of it."

"Thanks, I'll try it. Whereabouts does Miss Hardenbrook live?"

"Miss Hardenbrook? Well, you can't see Miss Hardenbrook's from here; it's pretty nigh 'tother end of the village. Be you a friend of Miss Hardenbrook's?" with a curious stare.

The young man laughed—a peculiar, short laugh—as he flung away his cigar, and invested himself in his overcoat.

"I don't know about that. If I'm not, however, it's Miss Hardenbrook's fault. I'm not at all proud. Good evening to you."

He strode away. The stragglers watched him out of sight.

"Not proud, ain't you?" said the station-master; "maybe not, but you're pretty considerable cheeky. What's he to Miss Hardenbrook, I wonder? She never has no visitors."

"One of her handsome niece's beaux, I expect," suggested one.

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