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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CRANFORD \*\*\*

[Picture: “Oh, sir! can you be Peter?”]

CRANFORD

\_by\_

\_Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell\_

[Picture: Picture of lady pouring tea]

\_With twenty-five coloured illustrations\_

\_by C. E. Brock\_

[Picture: Decorative graphic]

1904

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\* \* \* \* \*

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CHAPTER I.

OUR SOCIETY

IN the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the

holders of houses above a certain rent are women. If a married couple

come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is

either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford

evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his

ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great

neighbouring commercial town of Drumble, distant only twenty miles on a

railroad. In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are

not at Cranford. What could they do if they were there? The surgeon

has his round of thirty miles, and sleeps at Cranford; but every man

cannot be a surgeon. For keeping the trim gardens full of choice

flowers without a weed to speck them; for frightening away little boys

who look wistfully at the said flowers through the railings; for rushing

out at the geese that occasionally venture in to the gardens if the

gates are left open; for deciding all questions of literature and

politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or

arguments; for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody’s

affairs in the parish; for keeping their neat maid-servants in admirable

order; for kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, and real tender

good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of

Cranford are quite sufficient. “A man,” as one of them observed to me

once, “is \_so\_ in the way in the house!” Although the ladies of

Cranford know all each other’s proceedings, they are exceedingly

indifferent to each other’s opinions. Indeed, as each has her own

individuality, not to say eccentricity, pretty strongly developed,

nothing is so easy as verbal retaliation; but, somehow, good-will

reigns among them to a considerable degree.

The Cranford ladies have only an occasional little quarrel, spirited out

in a few peppery words and angry jerks of the head; just enough to

prevent the even tenor of their lives from becoming too flat. Their

dress is very independent of fashion; as they observe, “What does it

signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?” And

if they go from home, their reason is equally cogent, “What does it

signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?” The materials of

their clothes are, in general, good and plain, and most of them are

nearly as scrupulous as Miss Tyler, of cleanly memory; but I will

answer for it, the last gigot, the last tight and scanty petticoat in

wear in England, was seen in Cranford—and seen without a smile.

[Picture: A magnificent family red silk umbrella]

I can testify to a magnificent family red silk umbrella, under which a

gentle little spinster, left alone of many brothers and sisters, used to

patter to church on rainy days. Have you any red silk umbrellas in

London? We had a tradition of the first that had ever been seen in

Cranford; and the little boys mobbed it, and called it “a stick in

petticoats.” It might have been the very red silk one I have described,

held by a strong father over a troop of little ones; the poor little

lady—the survivor of all—could scarcely carry it.

Then there were rules and regulations for visiting and calls; and they

were announced to any young people who might be staying in the town,

with all the solemnity with which the old Manx laws were read once a

year on the Tinwald Mount.

“Our friends have sent to inquire how you are after your journey

to-night, my dear” (fifteen miles in a gentleman’s carriage); “they will

give you some rest to-morrow, but the next day, I have no doubt, they

will call; so be at liberty after twelve—from twelve to three are our

calling hours.”

Then, after they had called—

“It is the third day; I dare say your mamma has told you, my dear, never

to let more than three days elapse between receiving a call and

returning it; and also, that you are never to stay longer than a quarter

of an hour.”

“But am I to look at my watch? How am I to find out when a quarter of

an hour has passed?”

“You must keep thinking about the time, my dear, and not allow yourself

to forget it in conversation.”

As everybody had this rule in their minds, whether they received or paid

a call, of course no absorbing subject was ever spoken about. We kept

ourselves to short sentences of small talk, and were punctual to our

time.

I imagine that a few of the gentlefolks of Cranford were poor, and had

some difficulty in making both ends meet; but they were like the

Spartans, and concealed their smart under a smiling face. We none of us

spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and

though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic. The Cranfordians

had that kindly \_esprit de corps\_ which made them overlook all

deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal their

poverty. When Mrs Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her

baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on

the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from

underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural

thing in the world, and talked on about household forms and ceremonies

as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants’ hall,

second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little

charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been

strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted

in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know

what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that

we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all

the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes.

There were one or two consequences arising from this general but

unacknowledged poverty, and this very much acknowledged gentility, which

were not amiss, and which might be introduced into many circles of

society to their great improvement. For instance, the inhabitants of

Cranford kept early hours, and clattered home in their pattens, under

the guidance of a lantern-bearer, about nine o’clock at night; and the

whole town was abed and asleep by half-past ten. Moreover, it was

considered “vulgar” (a tremendous word in Cranford) to give anything

expensive, in the way of eatable or drinkable, at the evening

entertainments. Wafer bread-and-butter and sponge-biscuits were all

that the Honourable Mrs Jamieson gave; and she was sister-in-law to the

late Earl of Glenmire, although she did practise such “elegant economy.”

“Elegant economy!” How naturally one falls back into the phraseology of

Cranford! There, economy was always “elegant,” and money-spending

always “vulgar and ostentatious”; a sort of sour-grapeism which made us

very peaceful and satisfied. I never shall forget the dismay felt when

a certain Captain Brown came to live at Cranford, and openly spoke about

his being poor—not in a whisper to an intimate friend, the doors and

windows being previously closed, but in the public street! in a loud

military voice! alleging his poverty as a reason for not taking a

particular house. The ladies of Cranford were already rather moaning

over the invasion of their territories by a man and a gentleman. He was

a half-pay captain, and had obtained some situation on a neighbouring

railroad, which had been vehemently petitioned against by the little

town; and if, in addition to his masculine gender, and his connection

with the obnoxious railroad, he was so brazen as to talk of being

poor—why, then, indeed, he must be sent to Coventry. Death was as true

and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud out in

the streets. It was a word not to be mentioned to ears polite. We had

tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of

visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything

that they wished. If we walked to or from a party, it was because the

night was \_so\_ fine, or the air \_so\_ refreshing, not because

sedan-chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of summer

silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till

we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact that we were, all of us, people

of very moderate means. Of course, then, we did not know what to make

of a man who could speak of poverty as if it was not a disgrace. Yet,

somehow, Captain Brown made himself respected in Cranford, and was

called upon, in spite of all resolutions to the contrary. I was

surprised to hear his opinions quoted as authority at a visit which I

paid to Cranford about a year after he had settled in the town. My own

friends had been among the bitterest opponents of any proposal to visit

the Captain and his daughters, only twelve months before; and now he was

even admitted in the tabooed hours before twelve. True, it was to

discover the cause of a smoking chimney, before the fire was lighted;

but still Captain Brown walked upstairs, nothing daunted, spoke in a

voice too large for the room, and joked quite in the way of a tame man

about the house. He had been blind to all the small slights, and

omissions of trivial ceremonies, with which he had been received. He

had been friendly, though the Cranford ladies had been cool; he had

answered small sarcastic compliments in good faith; and with his manly

frankness had overpowered all the shrinking which met him as a man who

was not ashamed to be poor. And, at last, his excellent masculine common

sense, and his facility in devising expedients to overcome domestic

dilemmas, had gained him an extraordinary place as authority among the

Cranford ladies. He himself went on in his course, as unaware of his

popularity as he had been of the reverse; and I am sure he was startled

one day when he found his advice so highly esteemed as to make some

counsel which he had given in jest to be taken in sober, serious

earnest.

It was on this subject: An old lady had an Alderney cow, which she

looked upon as a daughter. You could not pay the short quarter of an

hour call without being told of the wonderful milk or wonderful

intelligence of this animal. The whole town knew and kindly regarded

Miss Betsy Barker’s Alderney; therefore great was the sympathy and

regret when, in an unguarded moment, the poor cow tumbled into a

lime-pit. She moaned so loudly that she was soon heard and rescued; but

meanwhile the poor beast had lost most of her hair, and came out looking

naked, cold, and miserable, in a bare skin. Everybody pitied the

animal, though a few could not restrain their smiles at her droll

appearance. Miss Betsy Barker absolutely cried with sorrow and dismay;

and it was said she thought of trying a bath of oil. This remedy,

perhaps, was recommended by some one of the number whose advice she

asked; but the proposal, if ever it was made, was knocked on the head by

Captain Brown’s decided “Get her a flannel waistcoat and flannel

drawers, ma’am, if you wish to keep her alive. But my advice is, kill

the poor creature at once.”

Miss Betsy Barker dried her eyes, and thanked the Captain heartily; she

set to work, and by-and-by all the town turned out to see the Alderney

meekly going to her pasture, clad in dark grey flannel. I have watched

her myself many a time. Do you ever see cows dressed in grey flannel in

London?

[Picture: Meekly going to her pasture]

Captain Brown had taken a small house on the outskirts of the town,

where he lived with his two daughters. He must have been upwards of

sixty at the time of the first visit I paid to Cranford after I had left

it as a residence. But he had a wiry, well-trained, elastic figure, a

stiff military throw-back of his head, and a springing step, which made

him appear much younger than he was. His eldest daughter looked almost

as old as himself, and betrayed the fact that his real was more than his

apparent age. Miss Brown must have been forty; she had a sickly,

pained, careworn expression on her face, and looked as if the gaiety of

youth had long faded out of sight. Even when young she must have been

plain and hard-featured. Miss Jessie Brown was ten years younger than

her sister, and twenty shades prettier. Her face was round and dimpled.

Miss Jenkyns once said, in a passion against Captain Brown (the cause

of which I will tell you presently), “that she thought it was time for

Miss Jessie to leave off her dimples, and not always to be trying to

look like a child.” It was true there was something childlike in her

face; and there will be, I think, till she dies, though she should live

to a hundred. Her eyes were large blue wondering eyes, looking straight

at you; her nose was unformed and snub, and her lips were red and dewy;

she wore her hair, too, in little rows of curls, which heightened this

appearance. I do not know whether she was pretty or not; but I liked

her face, and so did everybody, and I do not think she could help her

dimples. She had something of her father’s jauntiness of gait and

manner; and any female observer might detect a slight difference in the

attire of the two sisters—that of Miss Jessie being about two pounds per

annum more expensive than Miss Brown’s. Two pounds was a large sum in

Captain Brown’s annual disbursements.

Such was the impression made upon me by the Brown family when I first

saw them all together in Cranford Church. The Captain I had met

before—on the occasion of the smoky chimney, which he had cured by some

simple alteration in the flue. In church, he held his double eye-glass

to his eyes during the Morning Hymn, and then lifted up his head erect

and sang out loud and joyfully. He made the responses louder than the

clerk—an old man with a piping feeble voice, who, I think, felt

aggrieved at the Captain’s sonorous bass, and quivered higher and higher

in consequence.

On coming out of church, the brisk Captain paid the most gallant

attention to his two daughters. He nodded and smiled to his

acquaintances; but he shook hands with none until he had helped Miss

Brown to unfurl her umbrella, had relieved her of her prayer-book, and

had waited patiently till she, with trembling nervous hands, had taken

up her gown to walk through the wet roads.

I wonder what the Cranford ladies did with Captain Brown at their

parties. We had often rejoiced, in former days, that there was no

gentleman to be attended to, and to find conversation for, at the

card-parties. We had congratulated ourselves upon the snugness of the

evenings; and, in our love for gentility, and distaste of mankind, we

had almost persuaded ourselves that to be a man was to be “vulgar”; so

that when I found my friend and hostess, Miss Jenkyns, was going to have

a party in my honour, and that Captain and the Miss Browns were invited,

I wondered much what would be the course of the evening. Card-tables,

with green baize tops, were set out by daylight, just as usual; it was

the third week in November, so the evenings closed in about four.

Candles, and clean packs of cards, were arranged on each table. The

fire was made up; the neat maid-servant had received her last

directions; and there we stood, dressed in our best, each with a

candle-lighter in our hands, ready to dart at the candles as soon as the

first knock came. Parties in Cranford were solemn festivities, making

the ladies feel gravely elated as they sat together in their best

dresses. As soon as three had arrived, we sat down to “Preference,” I

being the unlucky fourth. The next four comers were put down

immediately to another table; and presently the tea-trays, which I had

seen set out in the store-room as I passed in the morning, were placed

each on the middle of a card-table. The china was delicate egg-shell;

the old-fashioned silver glittered with polishing; but the eatables were

of the slightest description. While the trays were yet on the tables,

Captain and the Miss Browns came in; and I could see that, somehow or

other, the Captain was a favourite with all the ladies present. Ruffled

brows were smoothed, sharp voices lowered at his approach. Miss Brown

looked ill, and depressed almost to gloom. Miss Jessie smiled as usual,

and seemed nearly as popular as her father. He immediately and quietly

assumed the man’s place in the room; attended to every one’s wants,

lessened the pretty maid-servant’s labour by waiting on empty cups and

bread-and-butterless ladies; and yet did it all in so easy and dignified

a manner, and so much as if it were a matter of course for the strong to

attend to the weak, that he was a true man throughout. He played for

threepenny points with as grave an interest as if they had been pounds;

and yet, in all his attention to strangers, he had an eye on his

suffering daughter—for suffering I was sure she was, though to many eyes

she might only appear to be irritable. Miss Jessie could not play

cards: but she talked to the sitters-out, who, before her coming, had

been rather inclined to be cross. She sang, too, to an old cracked

piano, which I think had been a spinet in its youth. Miss Jessie sang,

“Jock of Hazeldean” a little out of tune; but we were none of us

musical, though Miss Jenkyns beat time, out of time, by way of appearing

to be so.

It was very good of Miss Jenkyns to do this; for I had seen that, a

little before, she had been a good deal annoyed by Miss Jessie Brown’s

unguarded admission (\_à propos\_ of Shetland wool) that she had an uncle,

her mother’s brother, who was a shopkeeper in Edinburgh. Miss Jenkyns

tried to drown this confession by a terrible cough—for the Honourable

Mrs Jamieson was sitting at a card-table nearest Miss Jessie, and what

would she say or think if she found out she was in the same room with a

shop-keeper’s niece! But Miss Jessie Brown (who had no tact, as we all

agreed the next morning) \_would\_ repeat the information, and assure Miss

Pole she could easily get her the identical Shetland wool required,

“through my uncle, who has the best assortment of Shetland goods of any

one in Edinbro’.” It was to take the taste of this out of our mouths,

and the sound of this out of our ears, that Miss Jenkyns proposed music;

so I say again, it was very good of her to beat time to the song.

When the trays re-appeared with biscuits and wine, punctually at a

quarter to nine, there was conversation, comparing of cards, and talking

over tricks; but by-and-by Captain Brown sported a bit of literature.

“Have you seen any numbers of ‘The Pickwick Papers’?” said he. (They

were then publishing in parts.) “Capital thing!”

Now Miss Jenkyns was daughter of a deceased rector of Cranford; and, on

the strength of a number of manuscript sermons, and a pretty good

library of divinity, considered herself literary, and looked upon any

conversation about books as a challenge to her. So she answered and

said, “Yes, she had seen them; indeed, she might say she had read them.”

“And what do you think of them?” exclaimed Captain Brown. “Aren’t they

famously good?”

So urged Miss Jenkyns could not but speak.

“I must say, I don’t think they are by any means equal to Dr Johnson.

Still, perhaps, the author is young. Let him persevere, and who knows

what he may become if he will take the great Doctor for his model?”

This was evidently too much for Captain Brown to take placidly; and I

saw the words on the tip of his tongue before Miss Jenkyns had finished

her sentence.

“It is quite a different sort of thing, my dear madam,” he began.

“I am quite aware of that,” returned she. “And I make allowances,

Captain Brown.”

“Just allow me to read you a scene out of this month’s number,” pleaded

he. “I had it only this morning, and I don’t think the company can have

read it yet.”

“As you please,” said she, settling herself with an air of resignation.

He read the account of the “swarry” which Sam Weller gave at Bath. Some

of us laughed heartily. \_I\_ did not dare, because I was staying in the

house. Miss Jenkyns sat in patient gravity. When it was ended, she

turned to me, and said with mild dignity—

“Fetch me ‘Rasselas,’ my dear, out of the book-room.”

When I had brought it to her, she turned to Captain Brown—

“Now allow \_me\_ to read you a scene, and then the present company can

judge between your favourite, Mr Boz, and Dr Johnson.”

She read one of the conversations between Rasselas and Imlac, in a

high-pitched, majestic voice: and when she had ended, she said, “I

imagine I am now justified in my preference of Dr Johnson as a writer of

fiction.” The Captain screwed his lips up, and drummed on the table,

but he did not speak. She thought she would give him a finishing blow

or two.

[Picture: Endeavouring to beguile her into conversation]

“I consider it vulgar, and below the dignity of literature, to publish

in numbers.”

“How was the \_Rambler\_ published, ma’am?” asked Captain Brown in a low

voice, which I think Miss Jenkyns could not have heard.

“Dr Johnson’s style is a model for young beginners. My father

recommended it to me when I began to write letters—I have formed my own

style upon it; I recommended it to your favourite.”

“I should be very sorry for him to exchange his style for any such

pompous writing,” said Captain Brown.

Miss Jenkyns felt this as a personal affront, in a way of which the

Captain had not dreamed. Epistolary writing she and her friends

considered as her \_forte\_. Many a copy of many a letter have I seen

written and corrected on the slate, before she “seized the half-hour

just previous to post-time to assure” her friends of this or of that;

and Dr Johnson was, as she said, her model in these compositions. She

drew herself up with dignity, and only replied to Captain Brown’s last

remark by saying, with marked emphasis on every syllable, “I prefer Dr

Johnson to Mr Boz.”

It is said—I won’t vouch for the fact—that Captain Brown was heard to

say, \_sotto voce\_, “D-n Dr Johnson!” If he did, he was penitent

afterwards, as he showed by going to stand near Miss Jenkyns’ arm-chair,

and endeavouring to beguile her into conversation on some more pleasing

subject. But she was inexorable. The next day she made the remark I

have mentioned about Miss Jessie’s dimples.

CHAPTER II.

THE CAPTAIN

IT was impossible to live a month at Cranford and not know the daily

habits of each resident; and long before my visit was ended I knew much

concerning the whole Brown trio. There was nothing new to be discovered

respecting their poverty; for they had spoken simply and openly about

that from the very first. They made no mystery of the necessity for

their being economical. All that remained to be discovered was the

Captain’s infinite kindness of heart, and the various modes in which,

unconsciously to himself, he manifested it. Some little anecdotes were

talked about for some time after they occurred. As we did not read

much, and as all the ladies were pretty well suited with servants, there

was a dearth of subjects for conversation. We therefore discussed the

circumstance of the Captain taking a poor old woman’s dinner out of her

hands one very slippery Sunday. He had met her returning from the

bakehouse as he came from church, and noticed her precarious footing;

and, with the grave dignity with which he did everything, he relieved

her of her burden, and steered along the street by her side, carrying

her baked mutton and potatoes safely home. This was thought very

eccentric; and it was rather expected that he would pay a round of

calls, on the Monday morning, to explain and apologise to the Cranford

sense of propriety: but he did no such thing: and then it was decided

that he was ashamed, and was keeping out of sight. In a kindly pity for

him, we began to say, “After all, the Sunday morning’s occurrence showed

great goodness of heart,” and it was resolved that he should be

comforted on his next appearance amongst us; but, lo! he came down upon

us, untouched by any sense of shame, speaking loud and bass as ever, his

head thrown back, his wig as jaunty and well-curled as usual, and we

were obliged to conclude he had forgotten all about Sunday.

Miss Pole and Miss Jessie Brown had set up a kind of intimacy on the

strength of the Shetland wool and the new knitting stitches; so it

happened that when I went to visit Miss Pole I saw more of the Browns

than I had done while staying with Miss Jenkyns, who had never got over

what she called Captain Brown’s disparaging remarks upon Dr Johnson as a

writer of light and agreeable fiction. I found that Miss Brown was

seriously ill of some lingering, incurable complaint, the pain

occasioned by which gave the uneasy expression to her face that I had

taken for unmitigated crossness. Cross, too, she was at times, when the

nervous irritability occasioned by her disease became past endurance.

Miss Jessie bore with her at these times, even more patiently than she

did with the bitter self-upbraidings by which they were invariably

succeeded. Miss Brown used to accuse herself, not merely of hasty and

irritable temper, but also of being the cause why her father and sister

were obliged to pinch, in order to allow her the small luxuries which

were necessaries in her condition. She would so fain have made

sacrifices for them, and have lightened their cares, that the original

generosity of her disposition added acerbity to her temper. All this

was borne by Miss Jessie and her father with more than placidity—with

absolute tenderness. I forgave Miss Jessie her singing out of tune, and

her juvenility of dress, when I saw her at home. I came to perceive

that Captain Brown’s dark Brutus wig and padded coat (alas! too often

threadbare) were remnants of the military smartness of his youth, which

he now wore unconsciously. He was a man of infinite resources, gained

in his barrack experience. As he confessed, no one could black his

boots to please him except himself; but, indeed, he was not above saving

the little maid-servant’s labours in every way—knowing, most likely,

that his daughter’s illness made the place a hard one.

He endeavoured to make peace with Miss Jenkyns soon after the memorable

dispute I have named, by a present of a wooden fire-shovel (his own

making), having heard her say how much the grating of an iron one

annoyed her. She received the present with cool gratitude, and thanked

him formally. When he was gone, she bade me put it away in the

lumber-room; feeling, probably, that no present from a man who preferred

Mr Boz to Dr Johnson could be less jarring than an iron fire-shovel.

Such was the state of things when I left Cranford and went to Drumble.

I had, however, several correspondents, who kept me \_au fait\_ as to the

proceedings of the dear little town. There was Miss Pole, who was

becoming as much absorbed in crochet as she had been once in knitting,

and the burden of whose letter was something like, “But don’t you forget

the white worsted at Flint’s” of the old song; for at the end of every

sentence of news came a fresh direction as to some crochet commission

which I was to execute for her. Miss Matilda Jenkyns (who did not mind

being called Miss Matty, when Miss Jenkyns was not by) wrote nice, kind,

rambling letters, now and then venturing into an opinion of her own; but

suddenly pulling herself up, and either begging me not to name what she

had said, as Deborah thought differently, and \_she\_ knew, or else

putting in a postscript to the effect that, since writing the above, she

had been talking over the subject with Deborah, and was quite convinced

that, etc.—(here probably followed a recantation of every opinion she

had given in the letter). Then came Miss Jenkyns—Deborah, as she liked

Miss Matty to call her, her father having once said that the Hebrew name

ought to be so pronounced. I secretly think she took the Hebrew

prophetess for a model in character; and, indeed, she was not unlike the

stern prophetess in some ways, making allowance, of course, for modern

customs and difference in dress. Miss Jenkyns wore a cravat, and a

little bonnet like a jockey-cap, and altogether had the appearance of a

strong-minded woman; although she would have despised the modern idea of

women being equal to men. Equal, indeed! she knew they were superior.

But to return to her letters. Everything in them was stately and grand

like herself. I have been looking them over (dear Miss Jenkyns, how I

honoured her!) and I will give an extract, more especially because it

relates to our friend Captain Brown:—

“The Honourable Mrs Jamieson has only just quitted me; and, in the

course of conversation, she communicated to me the intelligence that she

had yesterday received a call from her revered husband’s quondam friend,

Lord Mauleverer. You will not easily conjecture what brought his

lordship within the precincts of our little town. It was to see Captain

Brown, with whom, it appears, his lordship was acquainted in the ‘plumed

wars,’ and who had the privilege of averting destruction from his

lordship’s head when some great peril was impending over it, off the

misnomered Cape of Good Hope. You know our friend the Honourable Mrs

Jamieson’s deficiency in the spirit of innocent curiosity, and you will

therefore not be so much surprised when I tell you she was quite unable

to disclose to me the exact nature of the peril in question. I was

anxious, I confess, to ascertain in what manner Captain Brown, with his

limited establishment, could receive so distinguished a guest; and I

discovered that his lordship retired to rest, and, let us hope, to

refreshing slumbers, at the Angel Hotel; but shared the Brunonian meals

during the two days that he honoured Cranford with his august presence.

Mrs Johnson, our civil butcher’s wife, informs me that Miss Jessie

purchased a leg of lamb; but, besides this, I can hear of no preparation

whatever to give a suitable reception to so distinguished a visitor.

Perhaps they entertained him with ‘the feast of reason and the flow of

soul’; and to us, who are acquainted with Captain Brown’s sad want of

relish for ‘the pure wells of English undefiled,’ it may be matter for

congratulation that he has had the opportunity of improving his taste by

holding converse with an elegant and refined member of the British

aristocracy. But from some mundane failings who is altogether free?”

Miss Pole and Miss Matty wrote to me by the same post. Such a piece of

news as Lord Mauleverer’s visit was not to be lost on the Cranford

letter-writers: they made the most of it. Miss Matty humbly apologised

for writing at the same time as her sister, who was so much more capable

than she to describe the honour done to Cranford; but in spite of a

little bad spelling, Miss Matty’s account gave me the best idea of the

commotion occasioned by his lordship’s visit, after it had occurred;

for, except the people at the Angel, the Browns, Mrs Jamieson, and a

little lad his lordship had sworn at for driving a dirty hoop against

the aristocratic legs, I could not hear of any one with whom his

lordship had held conversation.

My next visit to Cranford was in the summer. There had been neither

births, deaths, nor marriages since I was there last. Everybody lived

in the same house, and wore pretty nearly the same well-preserved,

old-fashioned clothes. The greatest event was, that Miss Jenkyns had

purchased a new carpet for the drawing-room. Oh, the busy work Miss

Matty and I had in chasing the sunbeams, as they fell in an afternoon

right down on this carpet through the blindless window! We spread

newspapers over the places and sat down to our book or our work; and,

lo! in a quarter of an hour the sun had moved, and was blazing away on a

fresh spot; and down again we went on our knees to alter the position of

the newspapers. We were very busy, too, one whole morning, before Miss

Jenkyns gave her party, in following her directions, and in cutting out

and stitching together pieces of newspaper so as to form little paths to

every chair set for the expected visitors, lest their shoes might dirty

or defile the purity of the carpet. Do you make paper paths for every

guest to walk upon in London?

Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns were not very cordial to each other. The

literary dispute, of which I had seen the beginning, was a “raw,” the

slightest touch on which made them wince. It was the only difference of

opinion they had ever had; but that difference was enough. Miss Jenkyns

could not refrain from talking at Captain Brown; and, though he did not

reply, he drummed with his fingers, which action she felt and resented

as very disparaging to Dr Johnson. He was rather ostentatious in his

preference of the writings of Mr Boz; would walk through the streets so

absorbed in them that he all but ran against Miss Jenkyns; and though

his apologies were earnest and sincere, and though he did not, in fact,

do more than startle her and himself, she owned to me she had rather he

had knocked her down, if he had only been reading a higher style of

literature. The poor, brave Captain! he looked older, and more worn,

and his clothes were very threadbare. But he seemed as bright and

cheerful as ever, unless he was asked about his daughter’s health.

“She suffers a great deal, and she must suffer more: we do what we can

to alleviate her pain;—God’s will be done!” He took off his hat at

these last words. I found, from Miss Matty, that everything had been

done, in fact. A medical man, of high repute in that country

neighbourhood, had been sent for, and every injunction he had given was

attended to, regardless of expense. Miss Matty was sure they denied

themselves many things in order to make the invalid comfortable; but

they never spoke about it; and as for Miss Jessie!—“I really think she’s

an angel,” said poor Miss Matty, quite overcome. “To see her way of

bearing with Miss Brown’s crossness, and the bright face she puts on

after she’s been sitting up a whole night and scolded above half of it,

is quite beautiful. Yet she looks as neat and as ready to welcome the

Captain at breakfast-time as if she had been asleep in the Queen’s bed

all night. My dear! you could never laugh at her prim little curls or

her pink bows again if you saw her as I have done.” I could only feel

very penitent, and greet Miss Jessie with double respect when I met her

next. She looked faded and pinched; and her lips began to quiver, as if

she was very weak, when she spoke of her sister. But she brightened,

and sent back the tears that were glittering in her pretty eyes, as she

said—

“But, to be sure, what a town Cranford is for kindness! I don’t suppose

any one has a better dinner than usual cooked but the best part of all

comes in a little covered basin for my sister. The poor people will

leave their earliest vegetables at our door for her. They speak short

and gruff, as if they were ashamed of it: but I am sure it often goes to

my heart to see their thoughtfulness.” The tears now came back and

overflowed; but after a minute or two she began to scold herself, and

ended by going away the same cheerful Miss Jessie as ever.

“But why does not this Lord Mauleverer do something for the man who

saved his life?” said I.

“Why, you see, unless Captain Brown has some reason for it, he never

speaks about being poor; and he walked along by his lordship looking as

happy and cheerful as a prince; and as they never called attention to

their dinner by apologies, and as Miss Brown was better that day, and

all seemed bright, I daresay his lordship never knew how much care there

was in the background. He did send game in the winter pretty often, but

now he is gone abroad.”

I had often occasion to notice the use that was made of fragments and

small opportunities in Cranford; the rose-leaves that were gathered ere

they fell to make into a potpourri for someone who had no garden; the

little bundles of lavender flowers sent to strew the drawers of some

town-dweller, or to burn in the chamber of some invalid. Things that

many would despise, and actions which it seemed scarcely worth while to

perform, were all attended to in Cranford. Miss Jenkyns stuck an apple

full of cloves, to be heated and smell pleasantly in Miss Brown’s room;

and as she put in each clove she uttered a Johnsonian sentence. Indeed,

she never could think of the Browns without talking Johnson; and, as

they were seldom absent from her thoughts just then, I heard many a

rolling, three-piled sentence.

Captain Brown called one day to thank Miss Jenkyns for many little

kindnesses, which I did not know until then that she had rendered. He

had suddenly become like an old man; his deep bass voice had a quavering

in it, his eyes looked dim, and the lines on his face were deep. He did

not—could not—speak cheerfully of his daughter’s state, but he talked

with manly, pious resignation, and not much. Twice over he said, “What

Jessie has been to us, God only knows!” and after the second time, he

got up hastily, shook hands all round without speaking, and left the

room.

That afternoon we perceived little groups in the street, all listening

with faces aghast to some tale or other. Miss Jenkyns wondered what

could be the matter for some time before she took the undignified step

of sending Jenny out to inquire.

Jenny came back with a white face of terror. “Oh, ma’am! Oh, Miss

Jenkyns, ma’am! Captain Brown is killed by them nasty cruel railroads!”

and she burst into tears. She, along with many others, had experienced

the poor Captain’s kindness.

“How?—where—where? Good God! Jenny, don’t waste time in crying, but

tell us something.” Miss Matty rushed out into the street at once, and

collared the man who was telling the tale.

[Picture: She brought the affrighted carter ... into the

drawing-room]

“Come in—come to my sister at once, Miss Jenkyns, the rector’s daughter.

Oh, man, man! say it is not true,” she cried, as she brought the

affrighted carter, sleeking down his hair, into the drawing-room, where

he stood with his wet boots on the new carpet, and no one regarded it.

“Please, mum, it is true. I seed it myself,” and he shuddered at the

recollection. “The Captain was a-reading some new book as he was deep

in, a-waiting for the down train; and there was a little lass as wanted

to come to its mammy, and gave its sister the slip, and came toddling

across the line. And he looked up sudden, at the sound of the train

coming, and seed the child, and he darted on the line and cotched it up,

and his foot slipped, and the train came over him in no time. O Lord,

Lord! Mum, it’s quite true, and they’ve come over to tell his

daughters. The child’s safe, though, with only a bang on its shoulder as

he threw it to its mammy. Poor Captain would be glad of that, mum,

wouldn’t he? God bless him!” The great rough carter puckered up his

manly face, and turned away to hide his tears. I turned to Miss

Jenkyns. She looked very ill, as if she were going to faint, and signed

to me to open the window.

“Matilda, bring me my bonnet. I must go to those girls. God pardon me,

if ever I have spoken contemptuously to the Captain!”

Miss Jenkyns arrayed herself to go out, telling Miss Matilda to give the

man a glass of wine. While she was away, Miss Matty and I huddled over

the fire, talking in a low and awestruck voice. I know we cried quietly

all the time.

Miss Jenkyns came home in a silent mood, and we durst not ask her many

questions. She told us that Miss Jessie had fainted, and that she and

Miss Pole had had some difficulty in bringing her round; but that, as

soon as she recovered, she begged one of them to go and sit with her

sister.

“Mr Hoggins says she cannot live many days, and she shall be spared this

shock,” said Miss Jessie, shivering with feelings to which she dared not

give way.

“But how can you manage, my dear?” asked Miss Jenkyns; “you cannot bear

up, she must see your tears.”

“God will help me—I will not give way—she was asleep when the news came;

she may be asleep yet. She would be so utterly miserable, not merely at

my father’s death, but to think of what would become of me; she is so

good to me.” She looked up earnestly in their faces with her soft true

eyes, and Miss Pole told Miss Jenkyns afterwards she could hardly bear

it, knowing, as she did, how Miss Brown treated her sister.

However, it was settled according to Miss Jessie’s wish. Miss Brown was

to be told her father had been summoned to take a short journey on

railway business. They had managed it in some way—Miss Jenkyns could

not exactly say how. Miss Pole was to stop with Miss Jessie. Mrs

Jamieson had sent to inquire. And this was all we heard that night; and

a sorrowful night it was. The next day a full account of the fatal

accident was in the county paper which Miss Jenkyns took in. Her eyes

were very weak, she said, and she asked me to read it. When I came to

the “gallant gentleman was deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of

‘Pickwick,’ which he had just received,” Miss Jenkyns shook her head

long and solemnly, and then sighed out, “Poor, dear, infatuated man!”

The corpse was to be taken from the station to the parish church, there

to be interred. Miss Jessie had set her heart on following it to the

grave; and no dissuasives could alter her resolve. Her restraint upon

herself made her almost obstinate; she resisted all Miss Pole’s

entreaties and Miss Jenkyns’ advice. At last Miss Jenkyns gave up the

point; and after a silence, which I feared portended some deep

displeasure against Miss Jessie, Miss Jenkyns said she should accompany

the latter to the funeral.

“It is not fit for you to go alone. It would be against both propriety

and humanity were I to allow it.”

Miss Jessie seemed as if she did not half like this arrangement; but her

obstinacy, if she had any, had been exhausted in her determination to go

to the interment. She longed, poor thing, I have no doubt, to cry alone

over the grave of the dear father to whom she had been all in all, and

to give way, for one little half-hour, uninterrupted by sympathy and

unobserved by friendship. But it was not to be. That afternoon Miss

Jenkyns sent out for a yard of black crape, and employed herself busily

in trimming the little black silk bonnet I have spoken about. When it

was finished she put it on, and looked at us for approbation—admiration

she despised. I was full of sorrow, but, by one of those whimsical

thoughts which come unbidden into our heads, in times of deepest grief,

I no sooner saw the bonnet than I was reminded of a helmet; and in that

hybrid bonnet, half helmet, half jockey-cap, did Miss Jenkyns attend

Captain Brown’s funeral, and, I believe, supported Miss Jessie with a

tender, indulgent firmness which was invaluable, allowing her to weep

her passionate fill before they left.

Miss Pole, Miss Matty, and I, meanwhile attended to Miss Brown: and hard

work we found it to relieve her querulous and never-ending complaints.

But if we were so weary and dispirited, what must Miss Jessie have been!

Yet she came back almost calm as if she had gained a new strength. She

put off her mourning dress, and came in, looking pale and gentle,

thanking us each with a soft long pressure of the hand. She could even

smile—a faint, sweet, wintry smile—as if to reassure us of her power to

endure; but her look made our eyes fill suddenly with tears, more than

if she had cried outright.

It was settled that Miss Pole was to remain with her all the watching

livelong night; and that Miss Matty and I were to return in the morning

to relieve them, and give Miss Jessie the opportunity for a few hours of

sleep. But when the morning came, Miss Jenkyns appeared at the

breakfast-table, equipped in her helmet-bonnet, and ordered Miss Matty

to stay at home, as she meant to go and help to nurse. She was

evidently in a state of great friendly excitement, which she showed by

eating her breakfast standing, and scolding the household all round.

No nursing—no energetic strong-minded woman could help Miss Brown now.

There was that in the room as we entered which was stronger than us all,

and made us shrink into solemn awestruck helplessness. Miss Brown was

dying. We hardly knew her voice, it was so devoid of the complaining

tone we had always associated with it. Miss Jessie told me afterwards

that it, and her face too, were just what they had been formerly, when

her mother’s death left her the young anxious head of the family, of

whom only Miss Jessie survived.

She was conscious of her sister’s presence, though not, I think, of

ours. We stood a little behind the curtain: Miss Jessie knelt with her

face near her sister’s, in order to catch the last soft awful whispers.

“Oh, Jessie! Jessie! How selfish I have been! God forgive me for

letting you sacrifice yourself for me as you did! I have so loved

you—and yet I have thought only of myself. God forgive me!”

“Hush, love! hush!” said Miss Jessie, sobbing.

“And my father, my dear, dear father! I will not complain now, if God

will give me strength to be patient. But, oh, Jessie! tell my father

how I longed and yearned to see him at last, and to ask his forgiveness.

He can never know now how I loved him—oh! if I might but tell him,

before I die! What a life of sorrow his has been, and I have done so

little to cheer him!”

A light came into Miss Jessie’s face. “Would it comfort you, dearest,

to think that he does know?—would it comfort you, love, to know that his

cares, his sorrows”—Her voice quivered, but she steadied it into

calmness—“Mary! he has gone before you to the place where the weary are

at rest. He knows now how you loved him.”

A strange look, which was not distress, came over Miss Brown’s face.

She did not speak for some time, but then we saw her lips form the

words, rather than heard the sound—“Father, mother, Harry, Archy;”—then,

as if it were a new idea throwing a filmy shadow over her darkened

mind—“But you will be alone, Jessie!”

Miss Jessie had been feeling this all during the silence, I think; for

the tears rolled down her cheeks like rain, at these words, and she

could not answer at first. Then she put her hands together tight, and

lifted them up, and said—but not to us—“Though He slay me, yet will I

trust in Him.”

In a few moments more Miss Brown lay calm and still—never to sorrow or

murmur more.

After this second funeral, Miss Jenkyns insisted that Miss Jessie should

come to stay with her rather than go back to the desolate house, which,

in fact, we learned from Miss Jessie, must now be given up, as she had

not wherewithal to maintain it. She had something above twenty pounds a

year, besides the interest of the money for which the furniture would

sell; but she could not live upon that: and so we talked over her

qualifications for earning money.

“I can sew neatly,” said she, “and I like nursing. I think, too, I

could manage a house, if any one would try me as housekeeper; or I would

go into a shop as saleswoman, if they would have patience with me at

first.”

Miss Jenkyns declared, in an angry voice, that she should do no such

thing; and talked to herself about “some people having no idea of their

rank as a captain’s daughter,” nearly an hour afterwards, when she

brought Miss Jessie up a basin of delicately-made arrowroot, and stood

over her like a dragoon until the last spoonful was finished: then she

disappeared. Miss Jessie began to tell me some more of the plans which

had suggested themselves to her, and insensibly fell into talking of the

days that were past and gone, and interested me so much I neither knew

nor heeded how time passed. We were both startled when Miss Jenkyns

reappeared, and caught us crying. I was afraid lest she would be

displeased, as she often said that crying hindered digestion, and I knew

she wanted Miss Jessie to get strong; but, instead, she looked queer and

excited, and fidgeted round us without saying anything. At last she

spoke.

“I have been so much startled—no, I’ve not been at all startled—don’t

mind me, my dear Miss Jessie—I’ve been very much surprised—in fact, I’ve

had a caller, whom you knew once, my dear Miss Jessie”—

Miss Jessie went very white, then flushed scarlet, and looked eagerly at

Miss Jenkyns.

“A gentleman, my dear, who wants to know if you would see him.”

“Is it?—it is not”—stammered out Miss Jessie—and got no farther.

“This is his card,” said Miss Jenkyns, giving it to Miss Jessie; and

while her head was bent over it, Miss Jenkyns went through a series of

winks and odd faces to me, and formed her lips into a long sentence, of

which, of course, I could not understand a word.

“May he come up?” asked Miss Jenkyns at last.

“Oh, yes! certainly!” said Miss Jessie, as much as to say, this is your

house, you may show any visitor where you like. She took up some

knitting of Miss Matty’s and began to be very busy, though I could see

how she trembled all over.

Miss Jenkyns rang the bell, and told the servant who answered it to show

Major Gordon upstairs; and, presently, in walked a tall, fine,

frank-looking man of forty or upwards. He shook hands with Miss Jessie;

but he could not see her eyes, she kept them so fixed on the ground.

Miss Jenkyns asked me if I would come and help her to tie up the

preserves in the store-room; and though Miss Jessie plucked at my gown,

and even looked up at me with begging eye, I durst not refuse to go

where Miss Jenkyns asked. Instead of tying up preserves in the

store-room, however, we went to talk in the dining-room; and there Miss

Jenkyns told me what Major Gordon had told her; how he had served in the

same regiment with Captain Brown, and had become acquainted with Miss

Jessie, then a sweet-looking, blooming girl of eighteen; how the

acquaintance had grown into love on his part, though it had been some

years before he had spoken; how, on becoming possessed, through the will

of an uncle, of a good estate in Scotland, he had offered and been

refused, though with so much agitation and evident distress that he was

sure she was not indifferent to him; and how he had discovered that the

obstacle was the fell disease which was, even then, too surely

threatening her sister. She had mentioned that the surgeons foretold

intense suffering; and there was no one but herself to nurse her poor

Mary, or cheer and comfort her father during the time of illness. They

had had long discussions; and on her refusal to pledge herself to him as

his wife when all should be over, he had grown angry, and broken off

entirely, and gone abroad, believing that she was a cold-hearted person

whom he would do well to forget. He had been travelling in the East,

and was on his return home when, at Rome, he saw the account of Captain

Brown’s death in \_Galignani\_.

Just then Miss Matty, who had been out all the morning, and had only

lately returned to the house, burst in with a face of dismay and

outraged propriety.

“Oh, goodness me!” she said. “Deborah, there’s a gentleman sitting in

the drawing-room with his arm round Miss Jessie’s waist!” Miss Matty’s

eyes looked large with terror.

[Picture: “With his arm around Miss Jessie’s waist!”]

Miss Jenkyns snubbed her down in an instant.

“The most proper place in the world for his arm to be in. Go away,

Matilda, and mind your own business.” This from her sister, who had

hitherto been a model of feminine decorum, was a blow for poor Miss

Matty, and with a double shock she left the room.

The last time I ever saw poor Miss Jenkyns was many years after this.

Mrs Gordon had kept up a warm and affectionate intercourse with all at

Cranford. Miss Jenkyns, Miss Matty, and Miss Pole had all been to visit

her, and returned with wonderful accounts of her house, her husband, her

dress, and her looks. For, with happiness, something of her early bloom

returned; she had been a year or two younger than we had taken her for.

Her eyes were always lovely, and, as Mrs Gordon, her dimples were not

out of place. At the time to which I have referred, when I last saw

Miss Jenkyns, that lady was old and feeble, and had lost something of

her strong mind. Little Flora Gordon was staying with the Misses

Jenkyns, and when I came in she was reading aloud to Miss Jenkyns, who

lay feeble and changed on the sofa. Flora put down the \_Rambler\_ when I

came in.

“Ah!” said Miss Jenkyns, “you find me changed, my dear. I can’t see as

I used to do. If Flora were not here to read to me, I hardly know how I

should get through the day. Did you ever read the \_Rambler\_? It’s a

wonderful book—wonderful! and the most improving reading for Flora”

(which I daresay it would have been, if she could have read half the

words without spelling, and could have understood the meaning of a

third), “better than that strange old book, with the queer name, poor

Captain Brown was killed for reading—that book by Mr Boz, you know—‘Old

Poz’; when I was a girl—but that’s a long time ago—I acted Lucy in ‘Old

Poz.’” She babbled on long enough for Flora to get a good long spell at

the “Christmas Carol,” which Miss Matty had left on the table.

CHAPTER III.

A LOVE AFFAIR OF LONG AGO

I THOUGHT that probably my connection with Cranford would cease after

Miss Jenkyns’s death; at least, that it would have to be kept up by

correspondence, which bears much the same relation to personal

intercourse that the books of dried plants I sometimes see (“Hortus

Siccus,” I think they call the thing) do to the living and fresh flowers

in the lanes and meadows. I was pleasantly surprised, therefore, by

receiving a letter from Miss Pole (who had always come in for a

supplementary week after my annual visit to Miss Jenkyns) proposing that

I should go and stay with her; and then, in a couple of days after my

acceptance, came a note from Miss Matty, in which, in a rather

circuitous and very humble manner, she told me how much pleasure I

should confer if I could spend a week or two with her, either before or

after I had been at Miss Pole’s; “for,” she said, “since my dear

sister’s death I am well aware I have no attractions to offer; it is

only to the kindness of my friends that I can owe their company.”

Of course I promised to come to dear Miss Matty as soon as I had ended

my visit to Miss Pole; and the day after my arrival at Cranford I went

to see her, much wondering what the house would be like without Miss

Jenkyns, and rather dreading the changed aspect of things. Miss Matty

began to cry as soon as she saw me. She was evidently nervous from

having anticipated my call. I comforted her as well as I could; and I

found the best consolation I could give was the honest praise that came

from my heart as I spoke of the deceased. Miss Matty slowly shook her

head over each virtue as it was named and attributed to her sister; and

at last she could not restrain the tears which had long been silently

flowing, but hid her face behind her handkerchief and sobbed aloud.

“Dear Miss Matty,” said I, taking her hand—for indeed I did not know in

what way to tell her how sorry I was for her, left deserted in the

world. She put down her handkerchief and said—

“My dear, I’d rather you did not call me Matty. She did not like it;

but I did many a thing she did not like, I’m afraid—and now she’s gone!

If you please, my love, will you call me Matilda?”

I promised faithfully, and began to practise the new name with Miss Pole

that very day; and, by degrees, Miss Matilda’s feeling on the subject

was known through Cranford, and we all tried to drop the more familiar

name, but with so little success that by-and-by we gave up the attempt.

My visit to Miss Pole was very quiet. Miss Jenkyns had so long taken

the lead in Cranford that now she was gone, they hardly knew how to give

a party. The Honourable Mrs Jamieson, to whom Miss Jenkyns herself had

always yielded the post of honour, was fat and inert, and very much at

the mercy of her old servants. If they chose that she should give a

party, they reminded her of the necessity for so doing: if not, she let

it alone. There was all the more time for me to hear old-world stories

from Miss Pole, while she sat knitting, and I making my father’s shirts.

I always took a quantity of plain sewing to Cranford; for, as we did not

read much, or walk much, I found it a capital time to get through my

work. One of Miss Pole’s stories related to a shadow of a love affair

that was dimly perceived or suspected long years before.

Presently, the time arrived when I was to remove to Miss Matilda’s

house. I found her timid and anxious about the arrangements for my

comfort. Many a time, while I was unpacking, did she come backwards and

forwards to stir the fire which burned all the worse for being so

frequently poked.

“Have you drawers enough, dear?” asked she. “I don’t know exactly how

my sister used to arrange them. She had capital methods. I am sure she

would have trained a servant in a week to make a better fire than this,

and Fanny has been with me four months.”

This subject of servants was a standing grievance, and I could not

wonder much at it; for if gentlemen were scarce, and almost unheard of

in the “genteel society” of Cranford, they or their

counterparts—handsome young men—abounded in the lower classes. The

pretty neat servant-maids had their choice of desirable “followers”; and

their mistresses, without having the sort of mysterious dread of men and

matrimony that Miss Matilda had, might well feel a little anxious lest

the heads of their comely maids should be turned by the joiner, or the

butcher, or the gardener, who were obliged, by their callings, to come

to the house, and who, as ill-luck would have it, were generally

handsome and unmarried. Fanny’s lovers, if she had any—and Miss Matilda

suspected her of so many flirtations that, if she had not been very

pretty, I should have doubted her having one—were a constant anxiety to

her mistress. She was forbidden, by the articles of her engagement, to

have “followers”; and though she had answered, innocently enough,

doubling up the hem of her apron as she spoke, “Please, ma’am, I never

had more than one at a time,” Miss Matty prohibited that one. But a

vision of a man seemed to haunt the kitchen. Fanny assured me that it

was all fancy, or else I should have said myself that I had seen a man’s

coat-tails whisk into the scullery once, when I went on an errand into

the store-room at night; and another evening, when, our watches having

stopped, I went to look at the clock, there was a very odd appearance,

singularly like a young man squeezed up between the clock and the back

of the open kitchen door: and I thought Fanny snatched up the candle

very hastily, so as to throw the shadow on the clock face, while she

very positively told me the time half-an-hour too early, as we found out

afterwards by the church clock. But I did not add to Miss Matty’s

anxieties by naming my suspicions, especially as Fanny said to me, the

next day, that it was such a queer kitchen for having odd shadows about

it, she really was almost afraid to stay; “for you know, miss,” she

added, “I don’t see a creature from six o’clock tea, till Missus rings

the bell for prayers at ten.”

However, it so fell out that Fanny had to leave and Miss Matilda begged

me to stay and “settle her” with the new maid; to which I consented,

after I had heard from my father that he did not want me at home. The

new servant was a rough, honest-looking, country girl, who had only

lived in a farm place before; but I liked her looks when she came to be

hired; and I promised Miss Matilda to put her in the ways of the house.

The said ways were religiously such as Miss Matilda thought her sister

would approve. Many a domestic rule and regulation had been a subject

of plaintive whispered murmur to me during Miss Jenkyns’s life; but now

that she was gone, I do not think that even I, who was a favourite,

durst have suggested an alteration. To give an instance: we constantly

adhered to the forms which were observed, at meal-times, in “my father,

the rector’s house.” Accordingly, we had always wine and dessert; but

the decanters were only filled when there was a party, and what remained

was seldom touched, though we had two wine-glasses apiece every day

after dinner, until the next festive occasion arrived, when the state of

the remainder wine was examined into in a family council. The dregs

were often given to the poor: but occasionally, when a good deal had

been left at the last party (five months ago, it might be), it was added

to some of a fresh bottle, brought up from the cellar. I fancy poor

Captain Brown did not much like wine, for I noticed he never finished

his first glass, and most military men take several. Then, as to our

dessert, Miss Jenkyns used to gather currants and gooseberries for it

herself, which I sometimes thought would have tasted better fresh from

the trees; but then, as Miss Jenkyns observed, there would have been

nothing for dessert in summer-time. As it was, we felt very genteel

with our two glasses apiece, and a dish of gooseberries at the top, of

currants and biscuits at the sides, and two decanters at the bottom.

When oranges came in, a curious proceeding was gone through. Miss

Jenkyns did not like to cut the fruit; for, as she observed, the juice

all ran out nobody knew where; sucking (only I think she used some more

recondite word) was in fact the only way of enjoying oranges; but then

there was the unpleasant association with a ceremony frequently gone

through by little babies; and so, after dessert, in orange season, Miss

Jenkyns and Miss Matty used to rise up, possess themselves each of an

orange in silence, and withdraw to the privacy of their own rooms to

indulge in sucking oranges.

I had once or twice tried, on such occasions, to prevail on Miss Matty

to stay, and had succeeded in her sister’s lifetime. I held up a

screen, and did not look, and, as she said, she tried not to make the

noise very offensive; but now that she was left alone, she seemed quite

horrified when I begged her to remain with me in the warm

dining-parlour, and enjoy her orange as she liked best. And so it was

in everything. Miss Jenkyns’s rules were made more stringent than ever,

because the framer of them was gone where there could be no appeal. In

all things else Miss Matilda was meek and undecided to a fault. I have

heard Fanny turn her round twenty times in a morning about dinner, just

as the little hussy chose; and I sometimes fancied she worked on Miss

Matilda’s weakness in order to bewilder her, and to make her feel more

in the power of her clever servant. I determined that I would not leave

her till I had seen what sort of a person Martha was; and, if I found

her trustworthy, I would tell her not to trouble her mistress with every

little decision.

Martha was blunt and plain-spoken to a fault; otherwise she was a brisk,

well-meaning, but very ignorant girl. She had not been with us a week

before Miss Matilda and I were astounded one morning by the receipt of a

letter from a cousin of hers, who had been twenty or thirty years in

India, and who had lately, as we had seen by the “Army List,” returned

to England, bringing with him an invalid wife who had never been

introduced to her English relations. Major Jenkyns wrote to propose

that he and his wife should spend a night at Cranford, on his way to

Scotland—at the inn, if it did not suit Miss Matilda to receive them

into her house; in which case they should hope to be with her as much as

possible during the day. Of course it \_must\_ suit her, as she said; for

all Cranford knew that she had her sister’s bedroom at liberty; but I am

sure she wished the Major had stopped in India and forgotten his cousins

out and out.

“Oh! how must I manage?” asked she helplessly. “If Deborah had been

alive she would have known what to do with a gentleman-visitor. Must I

put razors in his dressing-room? Dear! dear! and I’ve got none.

Deborah would have had them. And slippers, and coat-brushes?” I

suggested that probably he would bring all these things with him. “And

after dinner, how am I to know when to get up and leave him to his wine?

Deborah would have done it so well; she would have been quite in her

element. Will he want coffee, do you think?” I undertook the

management of the coffee, and told her I would instruct Martha in the

art of waiting—in which it must be owned she was terribly deficient—and

that I had no doubt Major and Mrs Jenkyns would understand the quiet

mode in which a lady lived by herself in a country town. But she was

sadly fluttered. I made her empty her decanters and bring up two fresh

bottles of wine. I wished I could have prevented her from being present

at my instructions to Martha, for she frequently cut in with some fresh

direction, muddling the poor girl’s mind as she stood open-mouthed,

listening to us both.

“Hand the vegetables round,” said I (foolishly, I see now—for it was

aiming at more than we could accomplish with quietness and simplicity);

and then, seeing her look bewildered, I added, “take the vegetables

round to people, and let them help themselves.”

“And mind you go first to the ladies,” put in Miss Matilda. “Always go

to the ladies before gentlemen when you are waiting.”

“I’ll do it as you tell me, ma’am,” said Martha; “but I like lads best.”

We felt very uncomfortable and shocked at this speech of Martha’s, yet I

don’t think she meant any harm; and, on the whole, she attended very

well to our directions, except that she “nudged” the Major when he did

not help himself as soon as she expected to the potatoes, while she was

handing them round.

The major and his wife were quiet unpretending people enough when they

did come; languid, as all East Indians are, I suppose. We were rather

dismayed at their bringing two servants with them, a Hindoo body-servant

for the Major, and a steady elderly maid for his wife; but they slept at

the inn, and took off a good deal of the responsibility by attending

carefully to their master’s and mistress’s comfort. Martha, to be sure,

had never ended her staring at the East Indian’s white turban and brown

complexion, and I saw that Miss Matilda shrunk away from him a little as

he waited at dinner. Indeed, she asked me, when they were gone, if he

did not remind me of Blue Beard? On the whole, the visit was most

satisfactory, and is a subject of conversation even now with Miss

Matilda; at the time it greatly excited Cranford, and even stirred up

the apathetic and Honourable Mrs Jamieson to some expression of

interest, when I went to call and thank her for the kind answers she had

vouchsafed to Miss Matilda’s inquiries as to the arrangement of a

gentleman’s dressing-room—answers which I must confess she had given in

the wearied manner of the Scandinavian prophetess—

“Leave me, leave me to repose.”

And \_now\_ I come to the love affair.

It seems that Miss Pole had a cousin, once or twice removed, who had

offered to Miss Matty long ago. Now this cousin lived four or five

miles from Cranford on his own estate; but his property was not large

enough to entitle him to rank higher than a yeoman; or rather, with

something of the “pride which apes humility,” he had refused to push

himself on, as so many of his class had done, into the ranks of the

squires. He would not allow himself to be called Thomas Holbrook,

\_Esq.\_; he even sent back letters with this address, telling the

post-mistress at Cranford that his name was \_Mr\_ Thomas Holbrook,

yeoman. He rejected all domestic innovations; he would have the house

door stand open in summer and shut in winter, without knocker or bell to

summon a servant. The closed fist or the knob of a stick did this

office for him if he found the door locked. He despised every

refinement which had not its root deep down in humanity. If people were

not ill, he saw no necessity for moderating his voice. He spoke the

dialect of the country in perfection, and constantly used it in

conversation; although Miss Pole (who gave me these particulars) added,

that he read aloud more beautifully and with more feeling than any one

she had ever heard, except the late rector.

“And how came Miss Matilda not to marry him?” asked I.

“Oh, I don’t know. She was willing enough, I think; but you know Cousin

Thomas would not have been enough of a gentleman for the rector and Miss

Jenkyns.”

“Well! but they were not to marry him,” said I, impatiently.

“No; but they did not like Miss Matty to marry below her rank. You know

she was the rector’s daughter, and somehow they are related to Sir Peter

Arley: Miss Jenkyns thought a deal of that.”

“Poor Miss Matty!” said I.

“Nay, now, I don’t know anything more than that he offered and was

refused. Miss Matty might not like him—and Miss Jenkyns might never

have said a word—it is only a guess of mine.”

“Has she never seen him since?” I inquired.

“No, I think not. You see Woodley, Cousin Thomas’s house, lies half-way

between Cranford and Misselton; and I know he made Misselton his

market-town very soon after he had offered to Miss Matty; and I don’t

think he has been into Cranford above once or twice since—once, when I

was walking with Miss Matty, in High Street, and suddenly she darted

from me, and went up Shire Lane. A few minutes after I was startled by

meeting Cousin Thomas.”

“How old is he?” I asked, after a pause of castle-building.

“He must be about seventy, I think, my dear,” said Miss Pole, blowing up

my castle, as if by gun-powder, into small fragments.

Very soon after—at least during my long visit to Miss Matilda—I had the

opportunity of seeing Mr Holbrook; seeing, too, his first encounter with

his former love, after thirty or forty years’ separation. I was helping

to decide whether any of the new assortment of coloured silks which they

had just received at the shop would do to match a grey and black

mousseline-delaine that wanted a new breadth, when a tall, thin, Don

Quixote-looking old man came into the shop for some woollen gloves. I

had never seen the person (who was rather striking) before, and I

watched him rather attentively while Miss Matty listened to the shopman.

The stranger wore a blue coat with brass buttons, drab breeches, and

gaiters, and drummed with his fingers on the counter until he was

attended to. When he answered the shop-boy’s question, “What can I have

the pleasure of showing you to-day, sir?” I saw Miss Matilda start, and

then suddenly sit down; and instantly I guessed who it was. She had

made some inquiry which had to be carried round to the other shopman.

“Miss Jenkyns wants the black sarsenet two-and-twopence the yard”; and

Mr Holbrook had caught the name, and was across the shop in two strides.

“Matty—Miss Matilda—Miss Jenkyns! God bless my soul! I should not have

known you. How are you? how are you?” He kept shaking her hand in a

way which proved the warmth of his friendship; but he repeated so often,

as if to himself, “I should not have known you!” that any sentimental

romance which I might be inclined to build was quite done away with by

his manner.

However, he kept talking to us all the time we were in the shop; and

then waving the shopman with the unpurchased gloves on one side, with

“Another time, sir! another time!” he walked home with us. I am happy

to say my client, Miss Matilda, also left the shop in an equally

bewildered state, not having purchased either green or red silk. Mr

Holbrook was evidently full with honest loud-spoken joy at meeting his

old love again; he touched on the changes that had taken place; he even

spoke of Miss Jenkyns as “Your poor sister! Well, well! we have all our

faults”; and bade us good-bye with many a hope that he should soon see

Miss Matty again. She went straight to her room, and never came back

till our early tea-time, when I thought she looked as if she had been

crying.

[Picture: Mr Holbrook ... bade us good-bye]

CHAPTER IV.

A VISIT TO AN OLD BACHELOR

A FEW days after, a note came from Mr Holbrook, asking us—impartially

asking both of us—in a formal, old-fashioned style, to spend a day at

his house—a long June day—for it was June now. He named that he had

also invited his cousin, Miss Pole; so that we might join in a fly,

which could be put up at his house.

I expected Miss Matty to jump at this invitation; but, no! Miss Pole

and I had the greatest difficulty in persuading her to go. She thought

it was improper; and was even half annoyed when we utterly ignored the

idea of any impropriety in her going with two other ladies to see her

old lover. Then came a more serious difficulty. She did not think

Deborah would have liked her to go. This took us half a day’s good hard

talking to get over; but, at the first sentence of relenting, I seized

the opportunity, and wrote and despatched an acceptance in her

name—fixing day and hour, that all might be decided and done with.

The next morning she asked me if I would go down to the shop with her;

and there, after much hesitation, we chose out three caps to be sent

home and tried on, that the most becoming might be selected to take with

us on Thursday.

She was in a state of silent agitation all the way to Woodley. She had

evidently never been there before; and, although she little dreamt I

knew anything of her early story, I could perceive she was in a tremor

at the thought of seeing the place which might have been her home, and

round which it is probable that many of her innocent girlish

imaginations had clustered. It was a long drive there, through paved

jolting lanes. Miss Matilda sat bolt upright, and looked wistfully out

of the windows as we drew near the end of our journey. The aspect of

the country was quiet and pastoral. Woodley stood among fields; and

there was an old-fashioned garden where roses and currant-bushes touched

each other, and where the feathery asparagus formed a pretty background

to the pinks and gilly-flowers; there was no drive up to the door. We

got out at a little gate, and walked up a straight box-edged path.

“My cousin might make a drive, I think,” said Miss Pole, who was afraid

of ear-ache, and had only her cap on.

“I think it is very pretty,” said Miss Matty, with a soft plaintiveness

in her voice, and almost in a whisper, for just then Mr Holbrook

appeared at the door, rubbing his hands in very effervescence of

hospitality. He looked more like my idea of Don Quixote than ever, and

yet the likeness was only external. His respectable housekeeper stood

modestly at the door to bid us welcome; and, while she led the elder

ladies upstairs to a bedroom, I begged to look about the garden. My

request evidently pleased the old gentleman, who took me all round the

place and showed me his six-and-twenty cows, named after the different

letters of the alphabet. As we went along, he surprised me occasionally

by repeating apt and beautiful quotations from the poets, ranging easily

from Shakespeare and George Herbert to those of our own day. He did

this as naturally as if he were thinking aloud, and their true and

beautiful words were the best expression he could find for what he was

thinking or feeling. To be sure he called Byron “my Lord Byrron,” and

pronounced the name of Goethe strictly in accordance with the English

sound of the letters—“As Goethe says, ‘Ye ever-verdant palaces,’” &c.

Altogether, I never met with a man, before or since, who had spent so

long a life in a secluded and not impressive country, with

ever-increasing delight in the daily and yearly change of season and

beauty.

When he and I went in, we found that dinner was nearly ready in the

kitchen—for so I suppose the room ought to be called, as there were oak

dressers and cupboards all round, all over by the side of the fireplace,

and only a small Turkey carpet in the middle of the flag-floor. The

room might have been easily made into a handsome dark oak dining-parlour

by removing the oven and a few other appurtenances of a kitchen, which

were evidently never used, the real cooking-place being at some

distance. The room in which we were expected to sit was a

stiffly-furnished, ugly apartment; but that in which we did sit was what

Mr Holbrook called the counting-house, where he paid his labourers their

weekly wages at a great desk near the door. The rest of the pretty

sitting-room—looking into the orchard, and all covered over with dancing

tree-shadows—was filled with books. They lay on the ground, they

covered the walls, they strewed the table. He was evidently half

ashamed and half proud of his extravagance in this respect. They were

of all kinds—poetry and wild weird tales prevailing. He evidently chose

his books in accordance with his own tastes, not because such and such

were classical or established favourites.

“Ah!” he said, “we farmers ought not to have much time for reading; yet

somehow one can’t help it.”

“What a pretty room!” said Miss Matty, \_sotto voce\_.

“What a pleasant place!” said I, aloud, almost simultaneously.

“Nay! if you like it,” replied he; “but can you sit on these great,

black leather, three-cornered chairs? I like it better than the best

parlour; but I thought ladies would take that for the smarter place.”

It was the smarter place, but, like most smart things, not at all

pretty, or pleasant, or home-like; so, while we were at dinner, the

servant-girl dusted and scrubbed the counting-house chairs, and we sat

there all the rest of the day.

We had pudding before meat; and I thought Mr Holbrook was going to make

some apology for his old-fashioned ways, for he began—

“I don’t know whether you like newfangled ways.”

“Oh, not at all!” said Miss Matty.

“No more do I,” said he. “My housekeeper \_will\_ have these in her new

fashion; or else I tell her that, when I was a young man, we used to

keep strictly to my father’s rule, ‘No broth, no ball; no ball, no

beef’; and always began dinner with broth. Then we had suet puddings,

boiled in the broth with the beef: and then the meat itself. If we did

not sup our broth, we had no ball, which we liked a deal better; and the

beef came last of all, and only those had it who had done justice to the

broth and the ball. Now folks begin with sweet things, and turn their

dinners topsy-turvy.”

When the ducks and green peas came, we looked at each other in dismay;

we had only two-pronged, black-handled forks. It is true the steel was

as bright as silver; but what were we to do? Miss Matty picked up her

peas, one by one, on the point of the prongs, much as Aminé ate her

grains of rice after her previous feast with the Ghoul. Miss Pole

sighed over her delicate young peas as she left them on one side of her

plate untasted, for they \_would\_ drop between the prongs. I looked at

my host: the peas were going wholesale into his capacious mouth,

shovelled up by his large round-ended knife. I saw, I imitated, I

survived! My friends, in spite of my precedent, could not muster up

courage enough to do an ungenteel thing; and, if Mr Holbrook had not

been so heartily hungry, he would probably have seen that the good peas

went away almost untouched.

After dinner, a clay pipe was brought in, and a spittoon; and, asking us

to retire to another room, where he would soon join us, if we disliked

tobacco-smoke, he presented his pipe to Miss Matty, and requested her to

fill the bowl. This was a compliment to a lady in his youth; but it was

rather inappropriate to propose it as an honour to Miss Matty, who had

been trained by her sister to hold smoking of every kind in utter

abhorrence. But if it was a shock to her refinement, it was also a

gratification to her feelings to be thus selected; so she daintily

stuffed the strong tobacco into the pipe, and then we withdrew.

“It is very pleasant dining with a bachelor,” said Miss Matty softly, as

we settled ourselves in the counting-house. “I only hope it is not

improper; so many pleasant things are!”

“What a number of books he has!” said Miss Pole, looking round the room.

“And how dusty they are!”

“I think it must be like one of the great Dr Johnson’s rooms,” said Miss

Matty. “What a superior man your cousin must be!”

“Yes!” said Miss Pole, “he’s a great reader; but I am afraid he has got

into very uncouth habits with living alone.”

“Oh! uncouth is too hard a word. I should call him eccentric; very

clever people always are!” replied Miss Matty.

[Picture: Now, what colour are ash-buds in March]

When Mr Holbrook returned, he proposed a walk in the fields; but the two

elder ladies were afraid of damp, and dirt, and had only very unbecoming

calashes to put on over their caps; so they declined, and I was again

his companion in a turn which he said he was obliged to take to see

after his men. He strode along, either wholly forgetting my existence,

or soothed into silence by his pipe—and yet it was not silence exactly.

He walked before me with a stooping gait, his hands clasped behind him;

and, as some tree or cloud, or glimpse of distant upland pastures,

struck him, he quoted poetry to himself, saying it out loud in a grand

sonorous voice, with just the emphasis that true feeling and

appreciation give. We came upon an old cedar tree, which stood at one

end of the house—

“The cedar spreads his dark-green layers of shade.”

“Capital term—‘layers!’ Wonderful man!” I did not know whether he was

speaking to me or not; but I put in an assenting “wonderful,” although I

knew nothing about it, just because I was tired of being forgotten, and

of being consequently silent.

He turned sharp round. “Ay! you may say ‘wonderful.’ Why, when I saw

the review of his poems in \_Blackwood\_, I set off within an hour, and

walked seven miles to Misselton (for the horses were not in the way) and

ordered them. Now, what colour are ash-buds in March?”

Is the man going mad? thought I. He is very like Don Quixote.

“What colour are they, I say?” repeated he vehemently.

“I am sure I don’t know, sir,” said I, with the meekness of ignorance.

“I knew you didn’t. No more did I—an old fool that I am!—till this

young man comes and tells me. Black as ash-buds in March. And I’ve

lived all my life in the country; more shame for me not to know. Black:

they are jet-black, madam.” And he went off again, swinging along to

the music of some rhyme he had got hold of.

When we came back, nothing would serve him but he must read us the poems

he had been speaking of; and Miss Pole encouraged him in his proposal, I

thought, because she wished me to hear his beautiful reading, of which

she had boasted; but she afterwards said it was because she had got to a

difficult part of her crochet, and wanted to count her stitches without

having to talk. Whatever he had proposed would have been right to Miss

Matty; although she did fall sound asleep within five minutes after he

had begun a long poem, called “Locksley Hall,” and had a comfortable

nap, unobserved, till he ended; when the cessation of his voice wakened

her up, and she said, feeling that something was expected, and that Miss

Pole was counting—

“What a pretty book!”

“Pretty, madam! it’s beautiful! Pretty, indeed!”

“Oh yes! I meant beautiful!” said she, fluttered at his disapproval of

her word. “It is so like that beautiful poem of Dr Johnson’s my sister

used to read—I forget the name of it; what was it, my dear?” turning to

me.

“Which do you mean, ma’am? What was it about?”

“I don’t remember what it was about, and I’ve quite forgotten what the

name of it was; but it was written by Dr Johnson, and was very

beautiful, and very like what Mr Holbrook has just been reading.”

“I don’t remember it,” said he reflectively. “But I don’t know Dr

Johnson’s poems well. I must read them.”

As we were getting into the fly to return, I heard Mr Holbrook say he

should call on the ladies soon, and inquire how they got home; and this

evidently pleased and fluttered Miss Matty at the time he said it; but

after we had lost sight of the old house among the trees her sentiments

towards the master of it were gradually absorbed into a distressing

wonder as to whether Martha had broken her word, and seized on the

opportunity of her mistress’s absence to have a “follower.” Martha

looked good, and steady, and composed enough, as she came to help us

out; she was always careful of Miss Matty, and to-night she made use of

this unlucky speech—

“Eh! dear ma’am, to think of your going out in an evening in such a thin

shawl! It’s no better than muslin. At your age, ma’am, you should be

careful.”

“My age!” said Miss Matty, almost speaking crossly, for her, for she was

usually gentle—“My age! Why, how old do you think I am, that you talk

about my age?”

“Well, ma’am, I should say you were not far short of sixty: but folks’

looks is often against them—and I’m sure I meant no harm.”

“Martha, I’m not yet fifty-two!” said Miss Matty, with grave emphasis;

for probably the remembrance of her youth had come very vividly before

her this day, and she was annoyed at finding that golden time so far

away in the past.

But she never spoke of any former and more intimate acquaintance with Mr

Holbrook. She had probably met with so little sympathy in her early

love, that she had shut it up close in her heart; and it was only by a

sort of watching, which I could hardly avoid since Miss Pole’s

confidence, that I saw how faithful her poor heart had been in its

sorrow and its silence.

She gave me some good reason for wearing her best cap every day, and sat

near the window, in spite of her rheumatism, in order to see, without

being seen, down into the street.

He came. He put his open palms upon his knees, which were far apart, as

he sat with his head bent down, whistling, after we had replied to his

inquiries about our safe return. Suddenly he jumped up—

“Well, madam! have you any commands for Paris? I am going there in a

week or two.”

“To Paris!” we both exclaimed.

“Yes, madam! I’ve never been there, and always had a wish to go; and I

think if I don’t go soon, I mayn’t go at all; so as soon as the hay is

got in I shall go, before harvest time.”

We were so much astonished that we had no commissions.

Just as he was going out of the room, he turned back, with his favourite

exclamation—

“God bless my soul, madam! but I nearly forgot half my errand. Here are

the poems for you you admired so much the other evening at my house.”

He tugged away at a parcel in his coat-pocket. “Good-bye, miss,” said

he; “good-bye, Matty! take care of yourself.” And he was gone. But he

had given her a book, and he had called her Matty, just as he used to do

thirty years ago.

“I wish he would not go to Paris,” said Miss Matilda anxiously. “I

don’t believe frogs will agree with him; he used to have to be very

careful what he ate, which was curious in so strong-looking a young

man.”

Soon after this I took my leave, giving many an injunction to Martha to

look after her mistress, and to let me know if she thought that Miss

Matilda was not so well; in which case I would volunteer a visit to my

old friend, without noticing Martha’s intelligence to her.

Accordingly I received a line or two from Martha every now and then;

and, about November I had a note to say her mistress was “very low and

sadly off her food”; and the account made me so uneasy that, although

Martha did not decidedly summon me, I packed up my things and went.

I received a warm welcome, in spite of the little flurry produced by my

impromptu visit, for I had only been able to give a day’s notice. Miss

Matilda looked miserably ill; and I prepared to comfort and cosset her.

I went down to have a private talk with Martha.

“How long has your mistress been so poorly?” I asked, as I stood by the

kitchen fire.

“Well! I think it’s better than a fortnight; it is, I know; it was one

Tuesday, after Miss Pole had been, that she went into this moping way.

I thought she was tired, and it would go off with a night’s rest; but

no! she has gone on and on ever since, till I thought it my duty to

write to you, ma’am.”

“You did quite right, Martha. It is a comfort to think she has so

faithful a servant about her. And I hope you find your place

comfortable?”

“Well, ma’am, missus is very kind, and there’s plenty to eat and drink,

and no more work but what I can do easily—but—” Martha hesitated.

“But what, Martha?”

“Why, it seems so hard of missus not to let me have any followers;

there’s such lots of young fellows in the town; and many a one has as

much as offered to keep company with me; and I may never be in such a

likely place again, and it’s like wasting an opportunity. Many a girl

as I know would have ’em unbeknownst to missus; but I’ve given my word,

and I’ll stick to it; or else this is just the house for missus never to

be the wiser if they did come: and it’s such a capable kitchen—there’s

such dark corners in it—I’d be bound to hide any one. I counted up last

Sunday night—for I’ll not deny I was crying because I had to shut the

door in Jem Hearn’s face, and he’s a steady young man, fit for any girl;

only I had given missus my word.” Martha was all but crying again; and

I had little comfort to give her, for I knew, from old experience, of

the horror with which both the Miss Jenkynses looked upon “followers”;

and in Miss Matty’s present nervous state this dread was not likely to

be lessened.

I went to see Miss Pole the next day, and took her completely by

surprise, for she had not been to see Miss Matilda for two days.

“And now I must go back with you, my dear, for I promised to let her

know how Thomas Holbrook went on; and, I’m sorry to say, his housekeeper

has sent me word to-day that he hasn’t long to live. Poor Thomas! that

journey to Paris was quite too much for him. His housekeeper says he

has hardly ever been round his fields since, but just sits with his

hands on his knees in the counting-house, not reading or anything, but

only saying what a wonderful city Paris was! Paris has much to answer

for if it’s killed my cousin Thomas, for a better man never lived.”

“Does Miss Matilda know of his illness?” asked I—a new light as to the

cause of her indisposition dawning upon me.

“Dear! to be sure, yes! Has not she told you? I let her know a

fortnight ago, or more, when first I heard of it. How odd she shouldn’t

have told you!”

Not at all, I thought; but I did not say anything. I felt almost guilty

of having spied too curiously into that tender heart, and I was not

going to speak of its secrets—hidden, Miss Matty believed, from all the

world. I ushered Miss Pole into Miss Matilda’s little drawing-room, and

then left them alone. But I was not surprised when Martha came to my

bedroom door, to ask me to go down to dinner alone, for that missus had

one of her bad headaches. She came into the drawing-room at tea-time,

but it was evidently an effort to her; and, as if to make up for some

reproachful feeling against her late sister, Miss Jenkyns, which had

been troubling her all the afternoon, and for which she now felt

penitent, she kept telling me how good and how clever Deborah was in her

youth; how she used to settle what gowns they were to wear at all the

parties (faint, ghostly ideas of grim parties, far away in the distance,

when Miss Matty and Miss Pole were young!); and how Deborah and her

mother had started the benefit society for the poor, and taught girls

cooking and plain sewing; and how Deborah had once danced with a lord;

and how she used to visit at Sir Peter Arley’s, and tried to remodel the

quiet rectory establishment on the plans of Arley Hall, where they kept

thirty servants; and how she had nursed Miss Matty through a long, long

illness, of which I had never heard before, but which I now dated in my

own mind as following the dismissal of the suit of Mr Holbrook. So we

talked softly and quietly of old times through the long November

evening.

The next day Miss Pole brought us word that Mr Holbrook was dead. Miss

Matty heard the news in silence; in fact, from the account of the

previous day, it was only what we had to expect. Miss Pole kept calling

upon us for some expression of regret, by asking if it was not sad that

he was gone, and saying—

“To think of that pleasant day last June, when he seemed so well! And

he might have lived this dozen years if he had not gone to that wicked

Paris, where they are always having revolutions.”

She paused for some demonstration on our part. I saw Miss Matty could

not speak, she was trembling so nervously; so I said what I really felt;

and after a call of some duration—all the time of which I have no doubt

Miss Pole thought Miss Matty received the news very calmly—our visitor

took her leave.

Miss Matty made a strong effort to conceal her feelings—a concealment

she practised even with me, for she has never alluded to Mr Holbrook

again, although the book he gave her lies with her Bible on the little

table by her bedside. She did not think I heard her when she asked the

little milliner of Cranford to make her caps something like the

Honourable Mrs Jamieson’s, or that I noticed the reply—

“But she wears widows’ caps, ma’am?”

“Oh! I only meant something in that style; not widows’, of course, but

rather like Mrs Jamieson’s.”

This effort at concealment was the beginning of the tremulous motion of

head and hands which I have seen ever since in Miss Matty.

The evening of the day on which we heard of Mr Holbrook’s death, Miss

Matilda was very silent and thoughtful; after prayers she called Martha

back and then she stood uncertain what to say.

“Martha!” she said, at last, “you are young”—and then she made so long a

pause that Martha, to remind her of her half-finished sentence, dropped

a curtsey, and said—

“Yes, please, ma’am; two-and-twenty last third of October, please,

ma’am.”

“And, perhaps, Martha, you may some time meet with a young man you like,

and who likes you. I did say you were not to have followers; but if

you meet with such a young man, and tell me, and I find he is

respectable, I have no objection to his coming to see you once a week.

God forbid!” said she in a low voice, “that I should grieve any young

hearts.” She spoke as if she were providing for some distant

contingency, and was rather startled when Martha made her ready eager

answer—

“Please, ma’am, there’s Jem Hearn, and he’s a joiner making

three-and-sixpence a-day, and six foot one in his stocking-feet, please,

ma’am; and if you’ll ask about him to-morrow morning, every one will

give him a character for steadiness; and he’ll be glad enough to come

to-morrow night, I’ll be bound.”

Though Miss Matty was startled, she submitted to Fate and Love.

CHAPTER V.

OLD LETTERS

I HAVE often noticed that almost every one has his own individual small

economies—careful habits of saving fractions of pennies in some one

peculiar direction—any disturbance of which annoys him more than

spending shillings or pounds on some real extravagance. An old

gentleman of my acquaintance, who took the intelligence of the failure

of a Joint-Stock Bank, in which some of his money was invested, with

stoical mildness, worried his family all through a long summer’s day

because one of them had torn (instead of cutting) out the written leaves

of his now useless bank-book; of course, the corresponding pages at the

other end came out as well, and this little unnecessary waste of paper

(his private economy) chafed him more than all the loss of his money.

Envelopes fretted his soul terribly when they first came in; the only

way in which he could reconcile himself to such waste of his cherished

article was by patiently turning inside out all that were sent to him,

and so making them serve again. Even now, though tamed by age, I see

him casting wistful glances at his daughters when they send a whole

inside of a half-sheet of note paper, with the three lines of acceptance

to an invitation, written on only one of the sides. I am not above

owning that I have this human weakness myself. String is my foible. My

pockets get full of little hanks of it, picked up and twisted together,

ready for uses that never come. I am seriously annoyed if any one cuts

the string of a parcel instead of patiently and faithfully undoing it

fold by fold. How people can bring themselves to use india-rubber

rings, which are a sort of deification of string, as lightly as they do,

I cannot imagine. To me an india-rubber ring is a precious treasure. I

have one which is not new—one that I picked up off the floor nearly six

years ago. I have really tried to use it, but my heart failed me, and I

could not commit the extravagance.

Small pieces of butter grieve others. They cannot attend to

conversation because of the annoyance occasioned by the habit which some

people have of invariably taking more butter than they want. Have you

not seen the anxious look (almost mesmeric) which such persons fix on

the article? They would feel it a relief if they might bury it out of

their sight by popping it into their own mouths and swallowing it down;

and they are really made happy if the person on whose plate it lies

unused suddenly breaks off a piece of toast (which he does not want at

all) and eats up his butter. They think that this is not waste.

Now Miss Matty Jenkyns was chary of candles. We had many devices to use

as few as possible. In the winter afternoons she would sit knitting for

two or three hours—she could do this in the dark, or by firelight—and

when I asked if I might not ring for candles to finish stitching my

wristbands, she told me to “keep blind man’s holiday.” They were

usually brought in with tea; but we only burnt one at a time. As we

lived in constant preparation for a friend who might come in any evening

(but who never did), it required some contrivance to keep our two

candles of the same length, ready to be lighted, and to look as if we

burnt two always. The candles took it in turns; and, whatever we might

be talking about or doing, Miss Matty’s eyes were habitually fixed upon

the candle, ready to jump up and extinguish it and to light the other

before they had become too uneven in length to be restored to equality

in the course of the evening.

One night, I remember this candle economy particularly annoyed me. I

had been very much tired of my compulsory “blind man’s holiday,”

especially as Miss Matty had fallen asleep, and I did not like to stir

the fire and run the risk of awakening her; so I could not even sit on

the rug, and scorch myself with sewing by firelight, according to my

usual custom. I fancied Miss Matty must be dreaming of her early life;

for she spoke one or two words in her uneasy sleep bearing reference to

persons who were dead long before. When Martha brought in the lighted

candle and tea, Miss Matty started into wakefulness, with a strange,

bewildered look around, as if we were not the people she expected to see

about her. There was a little sad expression that shadowed her face as

she recognised me; but immediately afterwards she tried to give me her

usual smile. All through tea-time her talk ran upon the days of her

childhood and youth. Perhaps this reminded her of the desirableness of

looking over all the old family letters, and destroying such as ought

not to be allowed to fall into the hands of strangers; for she had often

spoken of the necessity of this task, but had always shrunk from it,

with a timid dread of something painful. To-night, however, she rose up

after tea and went for them—in the dark; for she piqued herself on the

precise neatness of all her chamber arrangements, and used to look

uneasily at me when I lighted a bed-candle to go to another room for

anything. When she returned there was a faint, pleasant smell of

Tonquin beans in the room. I had always noticed this scent about any of

the things which had belonged to her mother; and many of the letters

were addressed to her—yellow bundles of love-letters, sixty or seventy

years old.

Miss Matty undid the packet with a sigh; but she stifled it directly, as

if it were hardly right to regret the flight of time, or of life either.

We agreed to look them over separately, each taking a different letter

out of the same bundle and describing its contents to the other before

destroying it. I never knew what sad work the reading of old letters

was before that evening, though I could hardly tell why. The letters

were as happy as letters could be—at least those early letters were.

There was in them a vivid and intense sense of the present time, which

seemed so strong and full, as if it could never pass away, and as if the

warm, living hearts that so expressed themselves could never die, and be

as nothing to the sunny earth. I should have felt less melancholy, I

believe, if the letters had been more so. I saw the tears stealing down

the well-worn furrows of Miss Matty’s cheeks, and her spectacles often

wanted wiping. I trusted at last that she would light the other candle,

for my own eyes were rather dim, and I wanted more light to see the

pale, faded ink; but no, even through her tears, she saw and remembered

her little economical ways.

The earliest set of letters were two bundles tied together, and ticketed

(in Miss Jenkyns’s handwriting) “Letters interchanged between my

ever-honoured father and my dearly-beloved mother, prior to their

marriage, in July 1774.” I should guess that the rector of Cranford was

about twenty-seven years of age when he wrote those letters; and Miss

Matty told me that her mother was just eighteen at the time of her

wedding. With my idea of the rector derived from a picture in the

dining-parlour, stiff and stately, in a huge full-bottomed wig, with

gown, cassock, and bands, and his hand upon a copy of the only sermon he

ever published—it was strange to read these letters. They were full of

eager, passionate ardour; short homely sentences, right fresh from the

heart (very different from the grand Latinised, Johnsonian style of the

printed sermon preached before some judge at assize time). His letters

were a curious contrast to those of his girl-bride. She was evidently

rather annoyed at his demands upon her for expressions of love, and

could not quite understand what he meant by repeating the same thing

over in so many different ways; but what she was quite clear about was a

longing for a white “Paduasoy”—whatever that might be; and six or seven

letters were principally occupied in asking her lover to use his

influence with her parents (who evidently kept her in good order) to

obtain this or that article of dress, more especially the white

“Paduasoy.” He cared nothing how she was dressed; she was always lovely

enough for him, as he took pains to assure her, when she begged him to

express in his answers a predilection for particular pieces of finery,

in order that she might show what he said to her parents. But at length

he seemed to find out that she would not be married till she had a

“trousseau” to her mind; and then he sent her a letter, which had

evidently accompanied a whole box full of finery, and in which he

requested that she might be dressed in everything her heart desired.

This was the first letter, ticketed in a frail, delicate hand, “From my

dearest John.” Shortly afterwards they were married, I suppose, from

the intermission in their correspondence.

“We must burn them, I think,” said Miss Matty, looking doubtfully at me.

“No one will care for them when I am gone.” And one by one she dropped

them into the middle of the fire, watching each blaze up, die out, and

rise away, in faint, white, ghostly semblance, up the chimney, before

she gave another to the same fate. The room was light enough now; but

I, like her, was fascinated into watching the destruction of those

letters, into which the honest warmth of a manly heart had been poured

forth.

The next letter, likewise docketed by Miss Jenkyns, was endorsed,

“Letter of pious congratulation and exhortation from my venerable

grandfather to my beloved mother, on occasion of my own birth. Also

some practical remarks on the desirability of keeping warm the

extremities of infants, from my excellent grandmother.”

The first part was, indeed, a severe and forcible picture of the

responsibilities of mothers, and a warning against the evils that were

in the world, and lying in ghastly wait for the little baby of two days

old. His wife did not write, said the old gentleman, because he had

forbidden it, she being indisposed with a sprained ankle, which (he

said) quite incapacitated her from holding a pen. However, at the foot

of the page was a small “T.O.,” and on turning it over, sure enough,

there was a letter to “my dear, dearest Molly,” begging her, when she

left her room, whatever she did, to go \_up\_ stairs before going \_down\_:

and telling her to wrap her baby’s feet up in flannel, and keep it warm

by the fire, although it was summer, for babies were so tender.

It was pretty to see from the letters, which were evidently exchanged

with some frequency between the young mother and the grandmother, how

the girlish vanity was being weeded out of her heart by love for her

baby. The white “Paduasoy” figured again in the letters, with almost as

much vigour as before. In one, it was being made into a christening

cloak for the baby. It decked it when it went with its parents to

spend a day or two at Arley Hall. It added to its charms, when it was

“the prettiest little baby that ever was seen. Dear mother, I wish you

could see her! Without any pershality, I do think she will grow up a

regular bewty!” I thought of Miss Jenkyns, grey, withered, and

wrinkled, and I wondered if her mother had known her in the courts of

heaven: and then I knew that she had, and that they stood there in

angelic guise.

There was a great gap before any of the rector’s letters appeared. And

then his wife had changed her mode of her endorsement. It was no longer

from, “My dearest John;” it was from “My Honoured Husband.” The letters

were written on occasion of the publication of the same sermon which was

represented in the picture. The preaching before “My Lord Judge,” and

the “publishing by request,” was evidently the culminating point—the

event of his life. It had been necessary for him to go up to London to

superintend it through the press. Many friends had to be called upon

and consulted before he could decide on any printer fit for so onerous a

task; and at length it was arranged that J. and J. Rivingtons were to

have the honourable responsibility. The worthy rector seemed to be

strung up by the occasion to a high literary pitch, for he could hardly

write a letter to his wife without cropping out into Latin. I remember

the end of one of his letters ran thus: “I shall ever hold the virtuous

qualities of my Molly in remembrance, \_dum memor ipse mei\_, \_dum

spiritus regit artus\_,” which, considering that the English of his

correspondent was sometimes at fault in grammar, and often in spelling,

might be taken as a proof of how much he “idealised his Molly;” and, as

Miss Jenkyns used to say, “People talk a great deal about idealising

now-a-days, whatever that may mean.” But this was nothing to a fit of

writing classical poetry which soon seized him, in which his Molly

figured away as “Maria.” The letter containing the \_carmen\_ was

endorsed by her, “Hebrew verses sent me by my honoured husband. I thowt

to have had a letter about killing the pig, but must wait. Mem., to

send the poetry to Sir Peter Arley, as my husband desires.” And in a

post-scriptum note in his handwriting it was stated that the Ode had

appeared in the \_Gentleman’s Magazine\_, December 1782.

Her letters back to her husband (treasured as fondly by him as if they

had been \_M. T. Ciceronis Epistolæ\_) were more satisfactory to an absent

husband and father than his could ever have been to her. She told him

how Deborah sewed her seam very neatly every day, and read to her in the

books he had set her; how she was a very “forrard,” good child, but

would ask questions her mother could not answer, but how she did not let

herself down by saying she did not know, but took to stirring the fire,

or sending the “forrard” child on an errand. Matty was now the mother’s

darling, and promised (like her sister at her age), to be a great

beauty. I was reading this aloud to Miss Matty, who smiled and sighed a

little at the hope, so fondly expressed, that “little Matty might not be

vain, even if she were a bewty.”

“I had very pretty hair, my dear,” said Miss Matilda; “and not a bad

mouth.” And I saw her soon afterwards adjust her cap and draw herself

up.

But to return to Mrs Jenkyns’s letters. She told her husband about the

poor in the parish; what homely domestic medicines she had administered;

what kitchen physic she had sent. She had evidently held his

displeasure as a rod in pickle over the heads of all the ne’er-do-wells.

She asked for his directions about the cows and pigs; and did not

always obtain them, as I have shown before.

The kind old grandmother was dead when a little boy was born, soon after

the publication of the sermon; but there was another letter of

exhortation from the grandfather, more stringent and admonitory than

ever, now that there was a boy to be guarded from the snares of the

world. He described all the various sins into which men might fall,

until I wondered how any man ever came to a natural death. The gallows

seemed as if it must have been the termination of the lives of most of

the grandfather’s friends and acquaintance; and I was not surprised at

the way in which he spoke of this life being “a vale of tears.”

It seemed curious that I should never have heard of this brother before;

but I concluded that he had died young, or else surely his name would

have been alluded to by his sisters.

By-and-by we came to packets of Miss Jenkyns’s letters. These Miss

Matty did regret to burn. She said all the others had been only

interesting to those who loved the writers, and that it seemed as if it

would have hurt her to allow them to fall into the hands of strangers,

who had not known her dear mother, and how good she was, although she

did not always spell, quite in the modern fashion; but Deborah’s letters

were so very superior! Any one might profit by reading them. It was a

long time since she had read Mrs Chapone, but she knew she used to think

that Deborah could have said the same things quite as well; and as for

Mrs Carter! people thought a deal of her letters, just because she had

written “Epictetus,” but she was quite sure Deborah would never have

made use of such a common expression as “I canna be fashed!”

[Picture: I made use of the time to think of many other things]

Miss Matty did grudge burning these letters, it was evident. She would

not let them be carelessly passed over with any quiet reading, and

skipping, to myself. She took them from me, and even lighted the second

candle in order to read them aloud with a proper emphasis, and without

stumbling over the big words. Oh dear! how I wanted facts instead of

reflections, before those letters were concluded! They lasted us two

nights; and I won’t deny that I made use of the time to think of many

other things, and yet I was always at my post at the end of each

sentence.

The rector’s letters, and those of his wife and mother-in-law, had all

been tolerably short and pithy, written in a straight hand, with the

lines very close together. Sometimes the whole letter was contained on

a mere scrap of paper. The paper was very yellow, and the ink very

brown; some of the sheets were (as Miss Matty made me observe) the old

original post, with the stamp in the corner representing a post-boy

riding for life and twanging his horn. The letters of Mrs Jenkyns and

her mother were fastened with a great round red wafer; for it was before

Miss Edgeworth’s “patronage” had banished wafers from polite society.

It was evident, from the tenor of what was said, that franks were in

great request, and were even used as a means of paying debts by needy

members of Parliament. The rector sealed his epistles with an immense

coat of arms, and showed by the care with which he had performed this

ceremony that he expected they should be cut open, not broken by any

thoughtless or impatient hand. Now, Miss Jenkyns’s letters were of a

later date in form and writing. She wrote on the square sheet which we

have learned to call old-fashioned. Her hand was admirably calculated,

together with her use of many-syllabled words, to fill up a sheet, and

then came the pride and delight of crossing. Poor Miss Matty got sadly

puzzled with this, for the words gathered size like snowballs, and

towards the end of her letter Miss Jenkyns used to become quite

sesquipedalian. In one to her father, slightly theological and

controversial in its tone, she had spoken of Herod, Tetrarch of Idumea.

Miss Matty read it “Herod Petrarch of Etruria,” and was just as well

pleased as if she had been right.

I can’t quite remember the date, but I think it was in 1805 that Miss

Jenkyns wrote the longest series of letters—on occasion of her absence

on a visit to some friends near Newcastle-upon-Tyne. These friends were

intimate with the commandant of the garrison there, and heard from him

of all the preparations that were being made to repel the invasion of

Buonaparte, which some people imagined might take place at the mouth of

the Tyne. Miss Jenkyns was evidently very much alarmed; and the first

part of her letters was often written in pretty intelligible English,

conveying particulars of the preparations which were made in the family

with whom she was residing against the dreaded event; the bundles of

clothes that were packed up ready for a flight to Alston Moor (a wild

hilly piece of ground between Northumberland and Cumberland); the signal

that was to be given for this flight, and for the simultaneous turning

out of the volunteers under arms—which said signal was to consist (if I

remember rightly) in ringing the church bells in a particular and

ominous manner. One day, when Miss Jenkyns and her hosts were at a

dinner-party in Newcastle, this warning summons was actually given (not

a very wise proceeding, if there be any truth in the moral attached to

the fable of the Boy and the Wolf; but so it was), and Miss Jenkyns,

hardly recovered from her fright, wrote the next day to describe the

sound, the breathless shock, the hurry and alarm; and then, taking

breath, she added, “How trivial, my dear father, do all our

apprehensions of the last evening appear, at the present moment, to calm

and enquiring minds!” And here Miss Matty broke in with—

“But, indeed, my dear, they were not at all trivial or trifling at the

time. I know I used to wake up in the night many a time and think I

heard the tramp of the French entering Cranford. Many people talked of

hiding themselves in the salt mines—and meat would have kept capitally

down there, only perhaps we should have been thirsty. And my father

preached a whole set of sermons on the occasion; one set in the

mornings, all about David and Goliath, to spirit up the people to

fighting with spades or bricks, if need were; and the other set in the

afternoons, proving that Napoleon (that was another name for Bony, as we

used to call him) was all the same as an Apollyon and Abaddon. I

remember my father rather thought he should be asked to print this last

set; but the parish had, perhaps, had enough of them with hearing.”

Peter Marmaduke Arley Jenkyns (“poor Peter!” as Miss Matty began to call

him) was at school at Shrewsbury by this time. The rector took up his

pen, and rubbed up his Latin once more, to correspond with his boy. It

was very clear that the lad’s were what are called show letters. They

were of a highly mental description, giving an account of his studies,

and his intellectual hopes of various kinds, with an occasional

quotation from the classics; but, now and then, the animal nature broke

out in such a little sentence as this, evidently written in a trembling

hurry, after the letter had been inspected: “Mother dear, do send me a

cake, and put plenty of citron in.” The “mother dear” probably answered

her boy in the form of cakes and “goody,” for there were none of her

letters among this set; but a whole collection of the rector’s, to whom

the Latin in his boy’s letters was like a trumpet to the old war-horse.

I do not know much about Latin, certainly, and it is, perhaps, an

ornamental language, but not very useful, I think—at least to judge from

the bits I remember out of the rector’s letters. One was, “You have not

got that town in your map of Ireland; but \_Bonus Bernardus non videt

omnia\_, as the Proverbia say.” Presently it became very evident that

“poor Peter” got himself into many scrapes. There were letters of

stilted penitence to his father, for some wrong-doing; and among them

all was a badly-written, badly-sealed, badly-directed, blotted note:—“My

dear, dear, dear, dearest mother, I will be a better boy; I will,

indeed; but don’t, please, be ill for me; I am not worth it; but I will

be good, darling mother.”

Miss Matty could not speak for crying, after she had read this note.

She gave it to me in silence, and then got up and took it to her sacred

recesses in her own room, for fear, by any chance, it might get burnt.

“Poor Peter!” she said; “he was always in scrapes; he was too easy.

They led him wrong, and then left him in the lurch. But he was too fond

of mischief. He could never resist a joke. Poor Peter!”

CHAPTER VI.

POOR PETER

POOR Peter’s career lay before him rather pleasantly mapped out by kind

friends, but \_Bonus Bernardus non videt omnia\_, in this map too. He was

to win honours at the Shrewsbury School, and carry them thick to

Cambridge, and after that, a living awaited him, the gift of his

godfather, Sir Peter Arley. Poor Peter! his lot in life was very

different to what his friends had hoped and planned. Miss Matty told me

all about it, and I think it was a relief when she had done so.

He was the darling of his mother, who seemed to dote on all her

children, though she was, perhaps, a little afraid of Deborah’s superior

acquirements. Deborah was the favourite of her father, and when Peter

disappointed him, she became his pride. The sole honour Peter brought

away from Shrewsbury was the reputation of being the best good fellow

that ever was, and of being the captain of the school in the art of

practical joking. His father was disappointed, but set about remedying

the matter in a manly way. He could not afford to send Peter to read

with any tutor, but he could read with him himself; and Miss Matty told

me much of the awful preparations in the way of dictionaries and

lexicons that were made in her father’s study the morning Peter began.

“My poor mother!” said she. “I remember how she used to stand in the

hall, just near enough the study-door, to catch the tone of my father’s

voice. I could tell in a moment if all was going right, by her face.

And it did go right for a long time.”

“What went wrong at last?” said I. “That tiresome Latin, I dare say.”

“No! it was not the Latin. Peter was in high favour with my father, for

he worked up well for him. But he seemed to think that the Cranford

people might be joked about, and made fun of, and they did not like it;

nobody does. He was always hoaxing them; ‘hoaxing’ is not a pretty

word, my dear, and I hope you won’t tell your father I used it, for I

should not like him to think that I was not choice in my language, after

living with such a woman as Deborah. And be sure you never use it

yourself. I don’t know how it slipped out of my mouth, except it was

that I was thinking of poor Peter and it was always his expression. But

he was a very gentlemanly boy in many things. He was like dear Captain

Brown in always being ready to help any old person or a child. Still,

he did like joking and making fun; and he seemed to think the old ladies

in Cranford would believe anything. There were many old ladies living

here then; we are principally ladies now, I know, but we are not so old

as the ladies used to be when I was a girl. I could laugh to think of

some of Peter’s jokes. No, my dear, I won’t tell you of them, because

they might not shock you as they ought to do, and they were very

shocking. He even took in my father once, by dressing himself up as a

lady that was passing through the town and wished to see the Rector of

Cranford, ‘who had published that admirable Assize Sermon.’ Peter said

he was awfully frightened himself when he saw how my father took it all

in, and even offered to copy out all his Napoleon Buonaparte sermons for

her—him, I mean—no, her, for Peter was a lady then. He told me he was

more terrified than he ever was before, all the time my father was

speaking. He did not think my father would have believed him; and yet if

he had not, it would have been a sad thing for Peter. As it was, he was

none so glad of it, for my father kept him hard at work copying out all

those twelve Buonaparte sermons for the lady—that was for Peter himself,

you know. He was the lady. And once when he wanted to go fishing,

Peter said, ‘Confound the woman!’—very bad language, my dear, but Peter

was not always so guarded as he should have been; my father was so angry

with him, it nearly frightened me out of my wits: and yet I could hardly

keep from laughing at the little curtseys Peter kept making, quite

slyly, whenever my father spoke of the lady’s excellent taste and sound

discrimination.”

[Picture: Confound the woman]

“Did Miss Jenkyns know of these tricks?” said I.

“Oh, no! Deborah would have been too much shocked. No, no one knew but

me. I wish I had always known of Peter’s plans; but sometimes he did

not tell me. He used to say the old ladies in the town wanted something

to talk about; but I don’t think they did. They had the \_St James’s

Chronicle\_ three times a week, just as we have now, and we have plenty

to say; and I remember the clacking noise there always was when some of

the ladies got together. But, probably, schoolboys talk more than

ladies. At last there was a terrible, sad thing happened.” Miss Matty

got up, went to the door, and opened it; no one was there. She rang the

bell for Martha, and when Martha came, her mistress told her to go for

eggs to a farm at the other end of the town.

“I will lock the door after you, Martha. You are not afraid to go, are

you?”

“No, ma’am, not at all; Jem Hearn will be only too proud to go with me.”

Miss Matty drew herself up, and as soon as we were alone, she wished

that Martha had more maidenly reserve.

“We’ll put out the candle, my dear. We can talk just as well by

firelight, you know. There! Well, you see, Deborah had gone from home

for a fortnight or so; it was a very still, quiet day, I remember,

overhead; and the lilacs were all in flower, so I suppose it was spring.

My father had gone out to see some sick people in the parish; I

recollect seeing him leave the house with his wig and shovel-hat and

cane. What possessed our poor Peter I don’t know; he had the sweetest

temper, and yet he always seemed to like to plague Deborah. She never

laughed at his jokes, and thought him ungenteel, and not careful enough

about improving his mind; and that vexed him.

“Well! he went to her room, it seems, and dressed himself in her old

gown, and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in

Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into a

little—you are sure you locked the door, my dear, for I should not like

anyone to hear—into—into a little baby, with white long clothes. It was

only, as he told me afterwards, to make something to talk about in the

town; he never thought of it as affecting Deborah. And he went and

walked up and down in the Filbert walk—just half-hidden by the rails,

and half-seen; and he cuddled his pillow, just like a baby, and talked

to it all the nonsense people do. Oh dear! and my father came stepping

stately up the street, as he always did; and what should he see but a

little black crowd of people—I daresay as many as twenty—all peeping

through his garden rails. So he thought, at first, they were only

looking at a new rhododendron that was in full bloom, and that he was

very proud of; and he walked slower, that they might have more time to

admire. And he wondered if he could make out a sermon from the

occasion, and thought, perhaps, there was some relation between the

rhododendrons and the lilies of the field. My poor father! When he

came nearer, he began to wonder that they did not see him; but their

heads were all so close together, peeping and peeping! My father was

amongst them, meaning, he said, to ask them to walk into the garden with

him, and admire the beautiful vegetable production, when—oh, my dear, I

tremble to think of it—he looked through the rails himself, and saw—I

don’t know what he thought he saw, but old Clare told me his face went

quite grey-white with anger, and his eyes blazed out under his frowning

black brows; and he spoke out—oh, so terribly!—and bade them all stop

where they were—not one of them to go, not one of them to stir a step;

and, swift as light, he was in at the garden door, and down the Filbert

walk, and seized hold of poor Peter, and tore his clothes off his

back—bonnet, shawl, gown, and all—and threw the pillow among the people

over the railings: and then he was very, very angry indeed, and before

all the people he lifted up his cane and flogged Peter!

“My dear, that boy’s trick, on that sunny day, when all seemed going

straight and well, broke my mother’s heart, and changed my father for

life. It did, indeed. Old Clare said, Peter looked as white as my

father; and stood as still as a statue to be flogged; and my father

struck hard! When my father stopped to take breath, Peter said, ‘Have

you done enough, sir?’ quite hoarsely, and still standing quite quiet.

I don’t know what my father said—or if he said anything. But old Clare

said, Peter turned to where the people outside the railing were, and

made them a low bow, as grand and as grave as any gentleman; and then

walked slowly into the house. I was in the store-room helping my mother

to make cowslip wine. I cannot abide the wine now, nor the scent of the

flowers; they turn me sick and faint, as they did that day, when Peter

came in, looking as haughty as any man—indeed, looking like a man, not

like a boy. ‘Mother!’ he said, ‘I am come to say, God bless you for

ever.’ I saw his lips quiver as he spoke; and I think he durst not say

anything more loving, for the purpose that was in his heart. She

looked at him rather frightened, and wondering, and asked him what was

to do. He did not smile or speak, but put his arms round her and kissed

her as if he did not know how to leave off; and before she could speak

again, he was gone. We talked it over, and could not understand it, and

she bade me go and seek my father, and ask what it was all about. I

found him walking up and down, looking very highly displeased.

“‘Tell your mother I have flogged Peter, and that he richly deserved

it.’

“I durst not ask any more questions. When I told my mother, she sat

down, quite faint, for a minute. I remember, a few days after, I saw

the poor, withered cowslip flowers thrown out to the leaf heap, to decay

and die there. There was no making of cowslip wine that year at the

rectory—nor, indeed, ever after.

“Presently my mother went to my father. I know I thought of Queen

Esther and King Ahasuerus; for my mother was very pretty and

delicate-looking, and my father looked as terrible as King Ahasuerus.

Some time after they came out together; and then my mother told me what

had happened, and that she was going up to Peter’s room at my father’s

desire—though she was not to tell Peter this—to talk the matter over

with him. But no Peter was there. We looked over the house; no Peter

was there! Even my father, who had not liked to join in the search at

first, helped us before long. The rectory was a very old house—steps up

into a room, steps down into a room, all through. At first, my mother

went calling low and soft, as if to reassure the poor boy, ‘Peter!

Peter, dear! it’s only me;’ but, by-and-by, as the servants came back

from the errands my father had sent them, in different directions, to

find where Peter was—as we found he was not in the garden, nor the

hayloft, nor anywhere about—my mother’s cry grew louder and wilder,

‘Peter! Peter, my darling! where are you?’ for then she felt and

understood that that long kiss meant some sad kind of ‘good-bye.’ The

afternoon went on—my mother never resting, but seeking again and again

in every possible place that had been looked into twenty times before,

nay, that she had looked into over and over again herself. My father sat

with his head in his hands, not speaking except when his messengers came

in, bringing no tidings; then he lifted up his face, so strong and sad,

and told them to go again in some new direction. My mother kept passing

from room to room, in and out of the house, moving noiselessly, but

never ceasing. Neither she nor my father durst leave the house, which

was the meeting-place for all the messengers. At last (and it was

nearly dark), my father rose up. He took hold of my mother’s arm as she

came with wild, sad pace through one door, and quickly towards another.

She started at the touch of his hand, for she had forgotten all in the

world but Peter.

“‘Molly!’ said he, ‘I did not think all this would happen.’ He looked

into her face for comfort—her poor face all wild and white; for neither

she nor my father had dared to acknowledge—much less act upon—the terror

that was in their hearts, lest Peter should have made away with himself.

My father saw no conscious look in his wife’s hot, dreary eyes, and he

missed the sympathy that she had always been ready to give him—strong

man as he was, and at the dumb despair in her face his tears began to

flow. But when she saw this, a gentle sorrow came over her countenance,

and she said, ‘Dearest John! don’t cry; come with me, and we’ll find

him,’ almost as cheerfully as if she knew where he was. And she took my

father’s great hand in her little soft one, and led him along, the tears

dropping as he walked on that same unceasing, weary walk, from room to

room, through house and garden.

“Oh, how I wished for Deborah! I had no time for crying, for now all

seemed to depend on me. I wrote for Deborah to come home. I sent a

message privately to that same Mr Holbrook’s house—poor Mr Holbrook;—you

know who I mean. I don’t mean I sent a message to him, but I sent one

that I could trust to know if Peter was at his house. For at one time

Mr Holbrook was an occasional visitor at the rectory—you know he was

Miss Pole’s cousin—and he had been very kind to Peter, and taught him

how to fish—he was very kind to everybody, and I thought Peter might

have gone off there. But Mr Holbrook was from home, and Peter had never

been seen. It was night now; but the doors were all wide open, and my

father and mother walked on and on; it was more than an hour since he

had joined her, and I don’t believe they had ever spoken all that time.

I was getting the parlour fire lighted, and one of the servants was

preparing tea, for I wanted them to have something to eat and drink and

warm them, when old Clare asked to speak to me.

“‘I have borrowed the nets from the weir, Miss Matty. Shall we drag the

ponds to-night, or wait for the morning?’

“I remember staring in his face to gather his meaning; and when I did, I

laughed out loud. The horror of that new thought—our bright, darling

Peter, cold, and stark, and dead! I remember the ring of my own laugh

now.

“The next day Deborah was at home before I was myself again. She would

not have been so weak as to give way as I had done; but my screams (my

horrible laughter had ended in crying) had roused my sweet dear mother,

whose poor wandering wits were called back and collected as soon as a

child needed her care. She and Deborah sat by my bedside; I knew by the

looks of each that there had been no news of Peter—no awful, ghastly

news, which was what I most had dreaded in my dull state between

sleeping and waking.

“The same result of all the searching had brought something of the same

relief to my mother, to whom, I am sure, the thought that Peter might

even then be hanging dead in some of the familiar home places had caused

that never-ending walk of yesterday. Her soft eyes never were the same

again after that; they had always a restless, craving look, as if

seeking for what they could not find. Oh! it was an awful time; coming

down like a thunder-bolt on the still sunny day when the lilacs were all

in bloom.”

“Where was Mr Peter?” said I.

“He had made his way to Liverpool; and there was war then; and some of

the king’s ships lay off the mouth of the Mersey; and they were only too

glad to have a fine likely boy such as him (five foot nine he was), come

to offer himself. The captain wrote to my father, and Peter wrote to my

mother. Stay! those letters will be somewhere here.”

We lighted the candle, and found the captain’s letter and Peter’s too.

And we also found a little simple begging letter from Mrs Jenkyns to

Peter, addressed to him at the house of an old schoolfellow whither she

fancied he might have gone. They had returned it unopened; and unopened

it had remained ever since, having been inadvertently put by among the

other letters of that time. This is it:—

“MY DEAREST PETER,—You did not think we should be so sorry as we

are, I know, or you would never have gone away. You are too good.

Your father sits and sighs till my heart aches to hear him. He

cannot hold up his head for grief; and yet he only did what he

thought was right. Perhaps he has been too severe, and perhaps

I have not been kind enough; but God knows how we love you, my

dear only boy. Don looks so sorry you are gone. Come back, and

make us happy, who love you so much. I know you will come back.”

But Peter did not come back. That spring day was the last time he ever

saw his mother’s face. The writer of the letter—the last—the only

person who had ever seen what was written in it, was dead long ago; and

I, a stranger, not born at the time when this occurrence took place, was

the one to open it.

The captain’s letter summoned the father and mother to Liverpool

instantly, if they wished to see their boy; and, by some of the wild

chances of life, the captain’s letter had been detained somewhere,

somehow.

Miss Matty went on, “And it was racetime, and all the post-horses at

Cranford were gone to the races; but my father and mother set off in our

own gig—and oh! my dear, they were too late—the ship was gone! And now

read Peter’s letter to my mother!”

It was full of love, and sorrow, and pride in his new profession, and a

sore sense of his disgrace in the eyes of the people at Cranford; but

ending with a passionate entreaty that she would come and see him before

he left the Mersey: “Mother; we may go into battle. I hope we shall,

and lick those French: but I must see you again before that time.”

“And she was too late,” said Miss Matty; “too late!”

We sat in silence, pondering on the full meaning of those sad, sad

words. At length I asked Miss Matty to tell me how her mother bore it.

“Oh!” she said, “she was patience itself. She had never been strong,

and this weakened her terribly. My father used to sit looking at her:

far more sad than she was. He seemed as if he could look at nothing

else when she was by; and he was so humble—so very gentle now. He

would, perhaps, speak in his old way—laying down the law, as it were—and

then, in a minute or two, he would come round and put his hand on our

shoulders, and ask us in a low voice, if he had said anything to hurt

us. I did not wonder at his speaking so to Deborah, for she was so

clever; but I could not bear to hear him talking so to me.

“But, you see, he saw what we did not—that it was killing my mother.

Yes! killing her (put out the candle, my dear; I can talk better in the

dark), for she was but a frail woman, and ill-fitted to stand the fright

and shock she had gone through; and she would smile at him and comfort

him, not in words, but in her looks and tones, which were always

cheerful when he was there. And she would speak of how she thought

Peter stood a good chance of being admiral very soon—he was so brave and

clever; and how she thought of seeing him in his navy uniform, and what

sort of hats admirals wore; and how much more fit he was to be a sailor

than a clergyman; and all in that way, just to make my father think she

was quite glad of what came of that unlucky morning’s work, and the

flogging which was always in his mind, as we all knew. But oh, my dear!

the bitter, bitter crying she had when she was alone; and at last, as

she grew weaker, she could not keep her tears in when Deborah or me was

by, and would give us message after message for Peter (his ship had gone

to the Mediterranean, or somewhere down there, and then he was ordered

off to India, and there was no overland route then); but she still said

that no one knew where their death lay in wait, and that we were not to

think hers was near. We did not think it, but we knew it, as we saw her

fading away.

“Well, my dear, it’s very foolish of me, I know, when in all likelihood

I am so near seeing her again.

“And only think, love! the very day after her death—for she did not live

quite a twelvemonth after Peter went away—the very day after—came a

parcel for her from India—from her poor boy. It was a large, soft,

white Indian shawl, with just a little narrow border all round; just

what my mother would have liked.

“We thought it might rouse my father, for he had sat with her hand in

his all night long; so Deborah took it in to him, and Peter’s letter to

her, and all. At first, he took no notice; and we tried to make a kind

of light careless talk about the shawl, opening it out and admiring it.

Then, suddenly, he got up, and spoke: ‘She shall be buried in it,’ he

said; ‘Peter shall have that comfort; and she would have liked it.’

“Well, perhaps it was not reasonable, but what could we do or say? One

gives people in grief their own way. He took it up and felt it: ‘It is

just such a shawl as she wished for when she was married, and her mother

did not give it her. I did not know of it till after, or she should

have had it—she should; but she shall have it now.’

“My mother looked so lovely in her death! She was always pretty, and

now she looked fair, and waxen, and young—younger than Deborah, as she

stood trembling and shivering by her. We decked her in the long soft

folds; she lay smiling, as if pleased; and people came—all Cranford

came—to beg to see her, for they had loved her dearly, as well they

might; and the countrywomen brought posies; old Clare’s wife brought

some white violets and begged they might lie on her breast.

“Deborah said to me, the day of my mother’s funeral, that if she had a

hundred offers she never would marry and leave my father. It was not

very likely she would have so many—I don’t know that she had one; but it

was not less to her credit to say so. She was such a daughter to my

father as I think there never was before or since. His eyes failed him,

and she read book after book, and wrote, and copied, and was always at

his service in any parish business. She could do many more things than

my poor mother could; she even once wrote a letter to the bishop for my

father. But he missed my mother sorely; the whole parish noticed it.

Not that he was less active; I think he was more so, and more patient in

helping every one. I did all I could to set Deborah at liberty to be

with him; for I knew I was good for little, and that my best work in the

world was to do odd jobs quietly, and set others at liberty. But my

father was a changed man.”

“Did Mr Peter ever come home?”

“Yes, once. He came home a lieutenant; he did not get to be admiral.

And he and my father were such friends! My father took him into every

house in the parish, he was so proud of him. He never walked out

without Peter’s arm to lean upon. Deborah used to smile (I don’t think

we ever laughed again after my mother’s death), and say she was quite

put in a corner. Not but what my father always wanted her when there

was letter-writing or reading to be done, or anything to be settled.”

“And then?” said I, after a pause.

“Then Peter went to sea again; and, by-and-by, my father died, blessing

us both, and thanking Deborah for all she had been to him; and, of

course, our circumstances were changed; and, instead of living at the

rectory, and keeping three maids and a man, we had to come to this small

house, and be content with a servant-of-all-work; but, as Deborah used

to say, we have always lived genteelly, even if circumstances have

compelled us to simplicity. Poor Deborah!”

“And Mr Peter?” asked I.

“Oh, there was some great war in India—I forget what they call it—and we

have never heard of Peter since then. I believe he is dead myself; and

it sometimes fidgets me that we have never put on mourning for him. And

then again, when I sit by myself, and all the house is still, I think I

hear his step coming up the street, and my heart begins to flutter and

beat; but the sound always goes past—and Peter never comes.

“That’s Martha back? No! \_I’ll\_ go, my dear; I can always find my way

in the dark, you know. And a blow of fresh air at the door will do my

head good, and it’s rather got a trick of aching.”

So she pattered off. I had lighted the candle, to give the room a

cheerful appearance against her return.

“Was it Martha?” asked I.

“Yes. And I am rather uncomfortable, for I heard such a strange noise,

just as I was opening the door.”

“Where?” I asked, for her eyes were round with affright.

“In the street—just outside—it sounded like”—

“Talking?” I put in, as she hesitated a little.

“No! kissing”—

CHAPTER VII.

VISITING

ONE morning, as Miss Matty and I sat at our work—it was before twelve

o’clock, and Miss Matty had not changed the cap with yellow ribbons that

had been Miss Jenkyns’s best, and which Miss Matty was now wearing out

in private, putting on the one made in imitation of Mrs Jamieson’s at

all times when she expected to be seen—Martha came up, and asked if Miss

Betty Barker might speak to her mistress. Miss Matty assented, and

quickly disappeared to change the yellow ribbons, while Miss Barker came

upstairs; but, as she had forgotten her spectacles, and was rather

flurried by the unusual time of the visit, I was not surprised to see

her return with one cap on the top of the other. She was quite

unconscious of it herself, and looked at us, with bland satisfaction.

Nor do I think Miss Barker perceived it; for, putting aside the little

circumstance that she was not so young as she had been, she was very

much absorbed in her errand, which she delivered herself of with an

oppressive modesty that found vent in endless apologies.

Miss Betty Barker was the daughter of the old clerk at Cranford who had

officiated in Mr Jenkyns’s time. She and her sister had had pretty good

situations as ladies’ maids, and had saved money enough to set up a

milliner’s shop, which had been patronised by the ladies in the

neighbourhood. Lady Arley, for instance, would occasionally give Miss

Barkers the pattern of an old cap of hers, which they immediately copied

and circulated among the \_élite\_ of Cranford. I say the \_élite\_, for

Miss Barkers had caught the trick of the place, and piqued themselves

upon their “aristocratic connection.” They would not sell their caps

and ribbons to anyone without a pedigree. Many a farmer’s wife or

daughter turned away huffed from Miss Barkers’ select millinery, and

went rather to the universal shop, where the profits of brown soap and

moist sugar enabled the proprietor to go straight to (Paris, he said,

until he found his customers too patriotic and John Bullish to wear what

the Mounseers wore) London, where, as he often told his customers, Queen

Adelaide had appeared, only the very week before, in a cap exactly like

the one he showed them, trimmed with yellow and blue ribbons, and had

been complimented by King William on the becoming nature of her

head-dress.

Miss Barkers, who confined themselves to truth, and did not approve of

miscellaneous customers, throve notwithstanding. They were

self-denying, good people. Many a time have I seen the eldest of them

(she that had been maid to Mrs Jamieson) carrying out some delicate mess

to a poor person. They only aped their betters in having “nothing to

do” with the class immediately below theirs. And when Miss Barker died,

their profits and income were found to be such that Miss Betty was

justified in shutting up shop and retiring from business. She also (as

I think I have before said) set up her cow; a mark of respectability in

Cranford almost as decided as setting up a gig is among some people.

She dressed finer than any lady in Cranford; and we did not wonder at

it; for it was understood that she was wearing out all the bonnets and

caps and outrageous ribbons which had once formed her stock-in-trade.

It was five or six years since she had given up shop, so in any other

place than Cranford her dress might have been considered \_passée\_.

And now Miss Betty Barker had called to invite Miss Matty to tea at her

house on the following Tuesday. She gave me also an impromptu

invitation, as I happened to be a visitor—though I could see she had a

little fear lest, since my father had gone to live in Drumble, he might

have engaged in that “horrid cotton trade,” and so dragged his family

down out of “aristocratic society.” She prefaced this invitation with

so many apologies that she quite excited my curiosity. “Her

presumption” was to be excused. What had she been doing? She seemed so

overpowered by it I could only think that she had been writing to Queen

Adelaide to ask for a receipt for washing lace; but the act which she so

characterised was only an invitation she had carried to her sister’s

former mistress, Mrs Jamieson. “Her former occupation considered, could

Miss Matty excuse the liberty?” Ah! thought I, she has found out that

double cap, and is going to rectify Miss Matty’s head-dress. No! it was

simply to extend her invitation to Miss Matty and to me. Miss Matty

bowed acceptance; and I wondered that, in the graceful action, she did

not feel the unusual weight and extraordinary height of her head-dress.

But I do not think she did, for she recovered her balance, and went on

talking to Miss Betty in a kind, condescending manner, very different

from the fidgety way she would have had if she had suspected how

singular her appearance was. “Mrs Jamieson is coming, I think you

said?” asked Miss Matty.

“Yes. Mrs Jamieson most kindly and condescendingly said she would be

happy to come. One little stipulation she made, that she should bring

Carlo. I told her that if I had a weakness, it was for dogs.”

“And Miss Pole?” questioned Miss Matty, who was thinking of her pool at

Preference, in which Carlo would not be available as a partner.

“I am going to ask Miss Pole. Of course, I could not think of asking

her until I had asked you, madam—the rector’s daughter, madam. Believe

me, I do not forget the situation my father held under yours.”

“And Mrs Forrester, of course?”

“And Mrs Forrester. I thought, in fact, of going to her before I went

to Miss Pole. Although her circumstances are changed, madam, she was

born at Tyrrell, and we can never forget her alliance to the Bigges, of

Bigelow Hall.”

Miss Matty cared much more for the little circumstance of her being a

very good card-player.

“Mrs Fitz-Adam—I suppose”—

“No, madam. I must draw a line somewhere. Mrs Jamieson would not, I

think, like to meet Mrs Fitz-Adam. I have the greatest respect for Mrs

Fitz-Adam—but I cannot think her fit society for such ladies as Mrs

Jamieson and Miss Matilda Jenkyns.”

Miss Betty Barker bowed low to Miss Matty, and pursed up her mouth. She

looked at me with sidelong dignity, as much as to say, although a

retired milliner, she was no democrat, and understood the difference of

ranks.

“May I beg you to come as near half-past six to my little dwelling, as

possible, Miss Matilda? Mrs Jamieson dines at five, but has kindly

promised not to delay her visit beyond that time—half-past six.” And

with a swimming curtsey Miss Betty Barker took her leave.

My prophetic soul foretold a visit that afternoon from Miss Pole, who

usually came to call on Miss Matilda after any event—or indeed in sight

of any event—to talk it over with her.

“Miss Betty told me it was to be a choice and select few,” said Miss

Pole, as she and Miss Matty compared notes.

“Yes, so she said. Not even Mrs Fitz-Adam.”

Now Mrs Fitz-Adam was the widowed sister of the Cranford surgeon, whom I

have named before. Their parents were respectable farmers, content with

their station. The name of these good people was Hoggins. Mr Hoggins

was the Cranford doctor now; we disliked the name and considered it

coarse; but, as Miss Jenkyns said, if he changed it to Piggins it would

not be much better. We had hoped to discover a relationship between him

and that Marchioness of Exeter whose name was Molly Hoggins; but the

man, careless of his own interests, utterly ignored and denied any such

relationship, although, as dear Miss Jenkyns had said, he had a sister

called Mary, and the same Christian names were very apt to run in

families.

Soon after Miss Mary Hoggins married Mr Fitz-Adam, she disappeared from

the neighbourhood for many years. She did not move in a sphere in

Cranford society sufficiently high to make any of us care to know what

Mr Fitz-Adam was. He died and was gathered to his fathers without our

ever having thought about him at all. And then Mrs Fitz-Adam reappeared

in Cranford (“as bold as a lion,” Miss Pole said), a well-to-do widow,

dressed in rustling black silk, so soon after her husband’s death that

poor Miss Jenkyns was justified in the remark she made, that “bombazine

would have shown a deeper sense of her loss.”

I remember the convocation of ladies who assembled to decide whether or

not Mrs Fitz-Adam should be called upon by the old blue-blooded

inhabitants of Cranford. She had taken a large rambling house, which

had been usually considered to confer a patent of gentility upon its

tenant, because, once upon a time, seventy or eighty years before, the

spinster daughter of an earl had resided in it. I am not sure if the

inhabiting this house was not also believed to convey some unusual power

of intellect; for the earl’s daughter, Lady Jane, had a sister, Lady

Anne, who had married a general officer in the time of the American war,

and this general officer had written one or two comedies, which were

still acted on the London boards, and which, when we saw them

advertised, made us all draw up, and feel that Drury Lane was paying a

very pretty compliment to Cranford. Still, it was not at all a settled

thing that Mrs Fitz-Adam was to be visited, when dear Miss Jenkyns died;

and, with her, something of the clear knowledge of the strict code of

gentility went out too. As Miss Pole observed, “As most of the ladies

of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without

children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive,

by-and-by we should have no society at all.”

Mrs Forrester continued on the same side.

“She had always understood that Fitz meant something aristocratic; there

was Fitz-Roy—she thought that some of the King’s children had been

called Fitz-Roy; and there was Fitz-Clarence, now—they were the children

of dear good King William the Fourth. Fitz-Adam!—it was a pretty name,

and she thought it very probably meant ‘Child of Adam.’ No one, who had

not some good blood in their veins, would dare to be called Fitz; there

was a deal in a name—she had had a cousin who spelt his name with two

little ffs—ffoulkes—and he always looked down upon capital letters and

said they belonged to lately-invented families. She had been afraid he

would die a bachelor, he was so very choice. When he met with a Mrs

ffarringdon, at a watering-place, he took to her immediately; and a very

pretty genteel woman she was—a widow, with a very good fortune; and ‘my

cousin,’ Mr ffoulkes, married her; and it was all owing to her two

little ffs.”

Mrs Fitz-Adam did not stand a chance of meeting with a Mr Fitz-anything

in Cranford, so that could not have been her motive for settling there.

Miss Matty thought it might have been the hope of being admitted into

the society of the place, which would certainly be a very agreeable rise

for \_ci-devant\_ Miss Hoggins; and if this had been her hope it would be

cruel to disappoint her.

So everybody called upon Mrs Fitz-Adam—everybody but Mrs Jamieson, who

used to show how honourable she was by never seeing Mrs Fitz-Adam when

they met at the Cranford parties. There would be only eight or ten

ladies in the room, and Mrs Fitz-Adam was the largest of all, and she

invariably used to stand up when Mrs Jamieson came in, and curtsey very

low to her whenever she turned in her direction—so low, in fact, that I

think Mrs Jamieson must have looked at the wall above her, for she never

moved a muscle of her face, no more than if she had not seen her. Still

Mrs Fitz-Adam persevered.

The spring evenings were getting bright and long when three or four

ladies in calashes met at Miss Barker’s door. Do you know what a

calash is? It is a covering worn over caps, not unlike the heads

fastened on old-fashioned gigs; but sometimes it is not quite so large.

This kind of head-gear always made an awful impression on the children

in Cranford; and now two or three left off their play in the quiet

sunny little street, and gathered in wondering silence round Miss Pole,

Miss Matty, and myself. We were silent too, so that we could hear

loud, suppressed whispers inside Miss Barker’s house: “Wait, Peggy! wait

till I’ve run upstairs and washed my hands. When I cough, open the

door; I’ll not be a minute.”

And, true enough it was not a minute before we heard a noise, between a

sneeze and a crow; on which the door flew open. Behind it stood a

round-eyed maiden, all aghast at the honourable company of calashes, who

marched in without a word. She recovered presence of mind enough to

usher us into a small room, which had been the shop, but was now

converted into a temporary dressing-room. There we unpinned and shook

ourselves, and arranged our features before the glass into a sweet and

gracious company-face; and then, bowing backwards with “After you,

ma’am,” we allowed Mrs Forrester to take precedence up the narrow

staircase that led to Miss Barker’s drawing-room. There she sat, as

stately and composed as though we had never heard that odd-sounding

cough, from which her throat must have been even then sore and rough.

Kind, gentle, shabbily-dressed Mrs Forrester was immediately conducted

to the second place of honour—a seat arranged something like Prince

Albert’s near the Queen’s—good, but not so good. The place of

pre-eminence was, of course, reserved for the Honourable Mrs Jamieson,

who presently came panting up the stairs—Carlo rushing round her on her

progress, as if he meant to trip her up.

And now Miss Betty Barker was a proud and happy woman! She stirred the

fire, and shut the door, and sat as near to it as she could, quite on

the edge of her chair. When Peggy came in, tottering under the weight

of the tea-tray, I noticed that Miss Barker was sadly afraid lest Peggy

should not keep her distance sufficiently. She and her mistress were on

very familiar terms in their every-day intercourse, and Peggy wanted now

to make several little confidences to her, which Miss Barker was on

thorns to hear, but which she thought it her duty, as a lady, to

repress. So she turned away from all Peggy’s asides and signs; but she

made one or two very malapropos answers to what was said; and at last,

seized with a bright idea, she exclaimed, “Poor, sweet Carlo! I’m

forgetting him. Come downstairs with me, poor ittie doggie, and it shall

have its tea, it shall!”

In a few minutes she returned, bland and benignant as before; but I

thought she had forgotten to give the “poor ittie doggie” anything to

eat, judging by the avidity with which he swallowed down chance pieces

of cake. The tea-tray was abundantly loaded—I was pleased to see it, I

was so hungry; but I was afraid the ladies present might think it

vulgarly heaped up. I know they would have done at their own houses;

but somehow the heaps disappeared here. I saw Mrs Jamieson eating

seed-cake, slowly and considerately, as she did everything; and I was

rather surprised, for I knew she had told us, on the occasion of her

last party, that she never had it in her house, it reminded her so much

of scented soap. She always gave us Savoy biscuits. However, Mrs

Jamieson was kindly indulgent to Miss Barker’s want of knowledge of the

customs of high life; and, to spare her feelings, ate three large pieces

of seed-cake, with a placid, ruminating expression of countenance, not

unlike a cow’s.

After tea there was some little demur and difficulty. We were six in

number; four could play at Preference, and for the other two there was

Cribbage. But all, except myself (I was rather afraid of the Cranford

ladies at cards, for it was the most earnest and serious business they

ever engaged in), were anxious to be of the “pool.” Even Miss Barker,

while declaring she did not know Spadille from Manille, was evidently

hankering to take a hand. The dilemma was soon put an end to by a

singular kind of noise. If a baron’s daughter-in-law could ever be

supposed to snore, I should have said Mrs Jamieson did so then; for,

overcome by the heat of the room, and inclined to doze by nature, the

temptation of that very comfortable arm-chair had been too much for her,

and Mrs Jamieson was nodding. Once or twice she opened her eyes with an

effort, and calmly but unconsciously smiled upon us; but by-and-by, even

her benevolence was not equal to this exertion, and she was sound

asleep.

[Picture: The temptation of the comfortable arm-chair had been too much

for her]

“It is very gratifying to me,” whispered Miss Barker at the card-table

to her three opponents, whom, notwithstanding her ignorance of the game,

she was “basting” most unmercifully—“very gratifying indeed, to see how

completely Mrs Jamieson feels at home in my poor little dwelling; she

could not have paid me a greater compliment.”

Miss Barker provided me with some literature in the shape of three or

four handsomely-bound fashion-books ten or twelve years old, observing,

as she put a little table and a candle for my especial benefit, that she

knew young people liked to look at pictures. Carlo lay and snorted, and

started at his mistress’s feet. He, too, was quite at home.

The card-table was an animated scene to watch; four ladies’ heads, with

niddle-noddling caps, all nearly meeting over the middle of the table in

their eagerness to whisper quick enough and loud enough: and every now

and then came Miss Barker’s “Hush, ladies! if you please, hush! Mrs

Jamieson is asleep.”

It was very difficult to steer clear between Mrs Forrester’s deafness

and Mrs Jamieson’s sleepiness. But Miss Barker managed her arduous task

well. She repeated the whisper to Mrs Forrester, distorting her face

considerably, in order to show, by the motions of her lips, what was

said; and then she smiled kindly all round at us, and murmured to

herself, “Very gratifying, indeed; I wish my poor sister had been alive

to see this day.”

Presently the door was thrown wide open; Carlo started to his feet, with

a loud snapping bark, and Mrs Jamieson awoke: or, perhaps, she had not

been asleep—as she said almost directly, the room had been so light she

had been glad to keep her eyes shut, but had been listening with great

interest to all our amusing and agreeable conversation. Peggy came in

once more, red with importance. Another tray! “Oh, gentility!” thought

I, “can you endure this last shock?” For Miss Barker had ordered (nay,

I doubt not, prepared, although she did say, “Why, Peggy, what have you

brought us?” and looked pleasantly surprised at the unexpected pleasure)

all sorts of good things for supper—scalloped oysters, potted lobsters,

jelly, a dish called “little Cupids” (which was in great favour with the

Cranford ladies, although too expensive to be given, except on solemn

and state occasions—macaroons sopped in brandy, I should have called it,

if I had not known its more refined and classical name). In short, we

were evidently to be feasted with all that was sweetest and best; and

we thought it better to submit graciously, even at the cost of our

gentility—which never ate suppers in general, but which, like most

non-supper-eaters, was particularly hungry on all special occasions.

Miss Barker, in her former sphere, had, I daresay, been made acquainted

with the beverage they call cherry-brandy. We none of us had ever seen

such a thing, and rather shrank back when she proffered it us—“just a

little, leetle glass, ladies; after the oysters and lobsters, you know.

Shell-fish are sometimes thought not very wholesome.” We all shook our

heads like female mandarins; but, at last, Mrs Jamieson suffered herself

to be persuaded, and we followed her lead. It was not exactly

unpalatable, though so hot and so strong that we thought ourselves bound

to give evidence that we were not accustomed to such things by coughing

terribly—almost as strangely as Miss Barker had done, before we were

admitted by Peggy.

“It’s very strong,” said Miss Pole, as she put down her empty glass; “I

do believe there’s spirit in it.”

“Only a little drop—just necessary to make it keep,” said Miss Barker.

“You know we put brandy-pepper over our preserves to make them keep. I

often feel tipsy myself from eating damson tart.”

I question whether damson tart would have opened Mrs Jamieson’s heart as

the cherry-brandy did; but she told us of a coming event, respecting

which she had been quite silent till that moment.

“My sister-in-law, Lady Glenmire, is coming to stay with me.”

There was a chorus of “Indeed!” and then a pause. Each one rapidly

reviewed her wardrobe, as to its fitness to appear in the presence of a

baron’s widow; for, of course, a series of small festivals were always

held in Cranford on the arrival of a visitor at any of our friends’

houses. We felt very pleasantly excited on the present occasion.

Not long after this the maids and the lanterns were announced. Mrs

Jamieson had the sedan-chair, which had squeezed itself into Miss

Barker’s narrow lobby with some difficulty, and most literally “stopped

the way.” It required some skilful manoeuvring on the part of the old

chairmen (shoemakers by day, but when summoned to carry the sedan

dressed up in a strange old livery—long great-coats, with small capes,

coeval with the sedan, and similar to the dress of the class in

Hogarth’s pictures) to edge, and back, and try at it again, and finally

to succeed in carrying their burden out of Miss Barker’s front door.

Then we heard their quick pit-a-pat along the quiet little street as we

put on our calashes and pinned up our gowns; Miss Barker hovering about

us with offers of help, which, if she had not remembered her former

occupation, and wished us to forget it, would have been much more

pressing.

CHAPTER VIII.

“YOUR LADYSHIP”

EARLY the next morning—directly after twelve—Miss Pole made her

appearance at Miss Matty’s. Some very trifling piece of business was

alleged as a reason for the call; but there was evidently something

behind. At last out it came.

“By the way, you’ll think I’m strangely ignorant; but, do you really

know, I am puzzled how we ought to address Lady Glenmire. Do you say,

‘Your Ladyship,’ where you would say ‘you’ to a common person? I have

been puzzling all morning; and are we to say ‘My Lady,’ instead of

‘Ma’am?’ Now you knew Lady Arley—will you kindly tell me the most

correct way of speaking to the peerage?”

Poor Miss Matty! she took off her spectacles and she put them on

again—but how Lady Arley was addressed, she could not remember.

“It is so long ago,” she said. “Dear! dear! how stupid I am! I don’t

think I ever saw her more than twice. I know we used to call Sir Peter,

‘Sir Peter’—but he came much oftener to see us than Lady Arley did.

Deborah would have known in a minute. ‘My lady’—‘your ladyship.’ It

sounds very strange, and as if it was not natural. I never thought of

it before; but, now you have named it, I am all in a puzzle.”

It was very certain Miss Pole would obtain no wise decision from Miss

Matty, who got more bewildered every moment, and more perplexed as to

etiquettes of address.

“Well, I really think,” said Miss Pole, “I had better just go and tell

Mrs Forrester about our little difficulty. One sometimes grows nervous;

and yet one would not have Lady Glenmire think we were quite ignorant of

the etiquettes of high life in Cranford.”

“And will you just step in here, dear Miss Pole, as you come back,

please, and tell me what you decide upon? Whatever you and Mrs

Forrester fix upon, will be quite right, I’m sure. ‘Lady Arley,’ ‘Sir

Peter,’” said Miss Matty to herself, trying to recall the old forms of

words.

“Who is Lady Glenmire?” asked I.

“Oh, she’s the widow of Mr Jamieson—that’s Mrs Jamieson’s late husband,

you know—widow of his eldest brother. Mrs Jamieson was a Miss Walker,

daughter of Governor Walker. ‘Your ladyship.’ My dear, if they fix on

that way of speaking, you must just let me practice a little on you

first, for I shall feel so foolish and hot saying it the first time to

Lady Glenmire.”

It was really a relief to Miss Matty when Mrs Jamieson came on a very

unpolite errand. I notice that apathetic people have more quiet

impertinence than others; and Mrs Jamieson came now to insinuate pretty

plainly that she did not particularly wish that the Cranford ladies

should call upon her sister-in-law. I can hardly say how she made this

clear; for I grew very indignant and warm, while with slow deliberation

she was explaining her wishes to Miss Matty, who, a true lady herself,

could hardly understand the feeling which made Mrs Jamieson wish to

appear to her noble sister-in-law as if she only visited “county”

families. Miss Matty remained puzzled and perplexed long after I had

found out the object of Mrs Jamieson’s visit.

When she did understand the drift of the honourable lady’s call, it was

pretty to see with what quiet dignity she received the intimation thus

uncourteously given. She was not in the least hurt—she was of too

gentle a spirit for that; nor was she exactly conscious of disapproving

of Mrs Jamieson’s conduct; but there was something of this feeling in

her mind, I am sure, which made her pass from the subject to others in a

less flurried and more composed manner than usual. Mrs Jamieson was,

indeed, the more flurried of the two, and I could see she was glad to

take her leave.

A little while afterwards Miss Pole returned, red and indignant. “Well!

to be sure! You’ve had Mrs Jamieson here, I find from Martha; and we

are not to call on Lady Glenmire. Yes! I met Mrs Jamieson, half-way

between here and Mrs Forrester’s, and she told me; she took me so by

surprise, I had nothing to say. I wish I had thought of something very

sharp and sarcastic; I dare say I shall to-night. And Lady Glenmire is

but the widow of a Scotch baron after all! I went on to look at Mrs

Forrester’s Peerage, to see who this lady was, that is to be kept under

a glass case: widow of a Scotch peer—never sat in the House of Lords—and

as poor as Job, I dare say; and she—fifth daughter of some Mr Campbell

or other. You are the daughter of a rector, at any rate, and related to

the Arleys; and Sir Peter might have been Viscount Arley, every one

says.”

Miss Matty tried to soothe Miss Pole, but in vain. That lady, usually

so kind and good-humoured, was now in a full flow of anger.

“And I went and ordered a cap this morning, to be quite ready,” said she

at last, letting out the secret which gave sting to Mrs Jamieson’s

intimation. “Mrs Jamieson shall see if it is so easy to get me to make

fourth at a pool when she has none of her fine Scotch relations with

her!”

In coming out of church, the first Sunday on which Lady Glenmire

appeared in Cranford, we sedulously talked together, and turned our

backs on Mrs Jamieson and her guest. If we might not call on her, we

would not even look at her, though we were dying with curiosity to know

what she was like. We had the comfort of questioning Martha in the

afternoon. Martha did not belong to a sphere of society whose

observation could be an implied compliment to Lady Glenmire, and Martha

had made good use of her eyes.

“Well, ma’am! is it the little lady with Mrs Jamieson, you mean? I

thought you would like more to know how young Mrs Smith was dressed; her

being a bride.” (Mrs Smith was the butcher’s wife).

Miss Pole said, “Good gracious me! as if we cared about a Mrs Smith;”

but was silent as Martha resumed her speech.

“The little lady in Mrs Jamieson’s pew had on, ma’am, rather an old

black silk, and a shepherd’s plaid cloak, ma’am, and very bright black

eyes she had, ma’am, and a pleasant, sharp face; not over young, ma’am,

but yet, I should guess, younger than Mrs Jamieson herself. She looked

up and down the church, like a bird, and nipped up her petticoats, when

she came out, as quick and sharp as ever I see. I’ll tell you what,

ma’am, she’s more like Mrs Deacon, at the ‘Coach and Horses,’ nor any

one.”

“Hush, Martha!” said Miss Matty, “that’s not respectful.”

“Isn’t it, ma’am? I beg pardon, I’m sure; but Jem Hearn said so as

well. He said, she was just such a sharp, stirring sort of a body”—

“Lady,” said Miss Pole.

“Lady—as Mrs Deacon.”

Another Sunday passed away, and we still averted our eyes from Mrs

Jamieson and her guest, and made remarks to ourselves that we thought

were very severe—almost too much so. Miss Matty was evidently uneasy at

our sarcastic manner of speaking.

Perhaps by this time Lady Glenmire had found out that Mrs Jamieson’s was

not the gayest, liveliest house in the world; perhaps Mrs Jamieson had

found out that most of the county families were in London, and that

those who remained in the country were not so alive as they might have

been to the circumstance of Lady Glenmire being in their neighbourhood.

Great events spring out of small causes; so I will not pretend to say

what induced Mrs Jamieson to alter her determination of excluding the

Cranford ladies, and send notes of invitation all round for a small

party on the following Tuesday. Mr Mulliner himself brought them round.

He \_would\_ always ignore the fact of there being a back door to any

house, and gave a louder rat-tat than his mistress, Mrs Jamieson. He

had three little notes, which he carried in a large basket, in order to

impress his mistress with an idea of their great weight, though they

might easily have gone into his waistcoat pocket.

Miss Matty and I quietly decided that we would have a previous

engagement at home: it was the evening on which Miss Matty usually made

candle-lighters of all the notes and letters of the week; for on Mondays

her accounts were always made straight—not a penny owing from the week

before; so, by a natural arrangement, making candle-lighters fell upon a

Tuesday evening, and gave us a legitimate excuse for declining Mrs

Jamieson’s invitation. But before our answer was written, in came Miss

Pole, with an open note in her hand.

“So!” she said. “Ah! I see you have got your note, too. Better late

than never. I could have told my Lady Glenmire she would be glad enough

of our society before a fortnight was over.”

“Yes,” said Miss Matty, “we’re asked for Tuesday evening. And perhaps

you would just kindly bring your work across and drink tea with us that

night. It is my usual regular time for looking over the last week’s

bills, and notes, and letters, and making candle-lighters of them; but

that does not seem quite reason enough for saying I have a previous

engagement at home, though I meant to make it do. Now, if you would

come, my conscience would be quite at ease, and luckily the note is not

written yet.”

I saw Miss Pole’s countenance change while Miss Matty was speaking.

“Don’t you mean to go then?” asked she.

“Oh, no!” said, Miss Matty quietly. “You don’t either, I suppose?”

“I don’t know,” replied Miss Pole. “Yes, I think I do,” said she,

rather briskly; and on seeing Miss Matty look surprised, she added, “You

see, one would not like Mrs Jamieson to think that anything she could

do, or say, was of consequence enough to give offence; it would be a

kind of letting down of ourselves, that I, for one, should not like. It

would be too flattering to Mrs Jamieson if we allowed her to suppose

that what she had said affected us a week, nay ten days afterwards.”

“Well! I suppose it is wrong to be hurt and annoyed so long about

anything; and, perhaps, after all, she did not mean to vex us. But I

must say, I could not have brought myself to say the things Mrs Jamieson

did about our not calling. I really don’t think I shall go.”

“Oh, come! Miss Matty, you must go; you know our friend Mrs Jamieson is

much more phlegmatic than most people, and does not enter into the

little delicacies of feeling which you possess in so remarkable a

degree.”

“I thought you possessed them, too, that day Mrs Jamieson called to tell

us not to go,” said Miss Matty innocently.

But Miss Pole, in addition to her delicacies of feeling, possessed a

very smart cap, which she was anxious to show to an admiring world; and

so she seemed to forget all her angry words uttered not a fortnight

before, and to be ready to act on what she called the great Christian

principle of “Forgive and forget”; and she lectured dear Miss Matty so

long on this head that she absolutely ended by assuring her it was her

duty, as a deceased rector’s daughter, to buy a new cap and go to the

party at Mrs Jamieson’s. So “we were most happy to accept,” instead of

“regretting that we were obliged to decline.”

[Picture: Mr Mulliner]

The expenditure on dress in Cranford was principally in that one article

referred to. If the heads were buried in smart new caps, the ladies

were like ostriches, and cared not what became of their bodies. Old

gowns, white and venerable collars, any number of brooches, up and down

and everywhere (some with dogs’ eyes painted in them; some that were

like small picture-frames with mausoleums and weeping-willows neatly

executed in hair inside; some, again, with miniatures of ladies and

gentlemen sweetly smiling out of a nest of stiff muslin), old brooches

for a permanent ornament, and new caps to suit the fashion of the

day—the ladies of Cranford always dressed with chaste elegance and

propriety, as Miss Barker once prettily expressed it.

And with three new caps, and a greater array of brooches than had ever

been seen together at one time since Cranford was a town, did Mrs

Forrester, and Miss Matty, and Miss Pole appear on that memorable

Tuesday evening. I counted seven brooches myself on Miss Pole’s dress.

Two were fixed negligently in her cap (one was a butterfly made of

Scotch pebbles, which a vivid imagination might believe to be the real

insect); one fastened her net neckerchief; one her collar; one

ornamented the front of her gown, midway between her throat and waist;

and another adorned the point of her stomacher. Where the seventh was I

have forgotten, but it was somewhere about her, I am sure.

But I am getting on too fast, in describing the dresses of the company.

I should first relate the gathering on the way to Mrs Jamieson’s. That

lady lived in a large house just outside the town. A road which had

known what it was to be a street ran right before the house, which

opened out upon it without any intervening garden or court. Whatever

the sun was about, he never shone on the front of that house. To be

sure, the living-rooms were at the back, looking on to a pleasant

garden; the front windows only belonged to kitchens and housekeepers’

rooms, and pantries, and in one of them Mr Mulliner was reported to sit.

Indeed, looking askance, we often saw the back of a head covered with

hair powder, which also extended itself over his coat-collar down to his

very waist; and this imposing back was always engaged in reading the \_St

James’s Chronicle\_, opened wide, which, in some degree, accounted for

the length of time the said newspaper was in reaching us—equal

subscribers with Mrs Jamieson, though, in right of her honourableness,

she always had the reading of it first. This very Tuesday, the delay in

forwarding the last number had been particularly aggravating; just when

both Miss Pole and Miss Matty, the former more especially, had been

wanting to see it, in order to coach up the Court news ready for the

evening’s interview with aristocracy. Miss Pole told us she had

absolutely taken time by the forelock, and been dressed by five o’clock,

in order to be ready if the \_St James’s Chronicle\_ should come in at the

last moment—the very \_St James’s Chronicle\_ which the powdered head was

tranquilly and composedly reading as we passed the accustomed window

this evening.

“The impudence of the man!” said Miss Pole, in a low indignant whisper.

“I should like to ask him whether his mistress pays her quarter-share

for his exclusive use.”

We looked at her in admiration of the courage of her thought; for Mr

Mulliner was an object of great awe to all of us. He seemed never to

have forgotten his condescension in coming to live at Cranford. Miss

Jenkyns, at times, had stood forth as the undaunted champion of her sex,

and spoken to him on terms of equality; but even Miss Jenkyns could get

no higher. In his pleasantest and most gracious moods he looked like a

sulky cockatoo. He did not speak except in gruff monosyllables. He

would wait in the hall when we begged him not to wait, and then look

deeply offended because we had kept him there, while, with trembling,

hasty hands we prepared ourselves for appearing in company.

Miss Pole ventured on a small joke as we went upstairs, intended, though

addressed to us, to afford Mr Mulliner some slight amusement. We all

smiled, in order to seem as if we felt at our ease, and timidly looked

for Mr Mulliner’s sympathy. Not a muscle of that wooden face had

relaxed; and we were grave in an instant.

Mrs Jamieson’s drawing-room was cheerful; the evening sun came streaming

into it, and the large square window was clustered round with flowers.

The furniture was white and gold; not the later style, Louis Quatorze, I

think they call it, all shells and twirls; no, Mrs Jamieson’s chairs and

tables had not a curve or bend about them. The chair and table legs

diminished as they neared the ground, and were straight and square in

all their corners. The chairs were all a-row against the walls, with

the exception of four or five which stood in a circle round the fire.

They were railed with white bars across the back and knobbed with gold;

neither the railings nor the knobs invited to ease. There was a

japanned table devoted to literature, on which lay a Bible, a Peerage,

and a Prayer-Book. There was another square Pembroke table dedicated to

the Fine Arts, on which were a kaleidoscope, conversation-cards,

puzzle-cards (tied together to an interminable length with faded pink

satin ribbon), and a box painted in fond imitation of the drawings which

decorate tea-chests. Carlo lay on the worsted-worked rug, and

ungraciously barked at us as we entered. Mrs Jamieson stood up, giving

us each a torpid smile of welcome, and looking helplessly beyond us at

Mr Mulliner, as if she hoped he would place us in chairs, for, if he did

not, she never could. I suppose he thought we could find our way to the

circle round the fire, which reminded me of Stonehenge, I don’t know

why. Lady Glenmire came to the rescue of our hostess, and, somehow or

other, we found ourselves for the first time placed agreeably, and not

formally, in Mrs Jamieson’s house. Lady Glenmire, now we had time to

look at her, proved to be a bright little woman of middle age, who had

been very pretty in the days of her youth, and who was even yet very

pleasant-looking. I saw Miss Pole appraising her dress in the first

five minutes, and I take her word when she said the next day—

“My dear! ten pounds would have purchased every stitch she had on—lace

and all.”

It was pleasant to suspect that a peeress could be poor, and partly

reconciled us to the fact that her husband had never sat in the House of

Lords; which, when we first heard of it, seemed a kind of swindling us

out of our prospects on false pretences; a sort of “A Lord and No Lord”

business.

We were all very silent at first. We were thinking what we could talk

about, that should be high enough to interest My Lady. There had been a

rise in the price of sugar, which, as preserving-time was near, was a

piece of intelligence to all our house-keeping hearts, and would have

been the natural topic if Lady Glenmire had not been by. But we were

not sure if the peerage ate preserves—much less knew how they were made.

At last, Miss Pole, who had always a great deal of courage and \_savoir

faire\_, spoke to Lady Glenmire, who on her part had seemed just as much

puzzled to know how to break the silence as we were.

“Has your ladyship been to Court lately?” asked she; and then gave a

little glance round at us, half timid and half triumphant, as much as to

say, “See how judiciously I have chosen a subject befitting the rank of

the stranger.”

“I never was there in my life,” said Lady Glenmire, with a broad Scotch

accent, but in a very sweet voice. And then, as if she had been too

abrupt, she added: “We very seldom went to London—only twice, in fact,

during all my married life; and before I was married my father had far

too large a family” (fifth daughter of Mr Campbell was in all our minds,

I am sure) “to take us often from our home, even to Edinburgh. Ye’ll

have been in Edinburgh, maybe?” said she, suddenly brightening up with

the hope of a common interest. We had none of us been there; but Miss

Pole had an uncle who once had passed a night there, which was very

pleasant.

Mrs Jamieson, meanwhile, was absorbed in wonder why Mr Mulliner did not

bring the tea; and at length the wonder oozed out of her mouth.

“I had better ring the bell, my dear, had not I?” said Lady Glenmire

briskly.

“No—I think not—Mulliner does not like to be hurried.”

We should have liked our tea, for we dined at an earlier hour than Mrs

Jamieson. I suspect Mr Mulliner had to finish the \_St James’s

Chronicle\_ before he chose to trouble himself about tea. His mistress

fidgeted and fidgeted, and kept saying, “I can’t think why Mulliner does

not bring tea. I can’t think what he can be about.” And Lady Glenmire

at last grew quite impatient, but it was a pretty kind of impatience

after all; and she rang the bell rather sharply, on receiving a

half-permission from her sister-in-law to do so. Mr Mulliner appeared

in dignified surprise. “Oh!” said Mrs Jamieson, “Lady Glenmire rang the

bell; I believe it was for tea.”

In a few minutes tea was brought. Very delicate was the china, very old

the plate, very thin the bread and butter, and very small the lumps of

sugar. Sugar was evidently Mrs Jamieson’s favourite economy. I

question if the little filigree sugar-tongs, made something like

scissors, could have opened themselves wide enough to take up an honest,

vulgar good-sized piece; and when I tried to seize two little minnikin

pieces at once, so as not to be detected in too many returns to the

sugar-basin, they absolutely dropped one, with a little sharp clatter,

quite in a malicious and unnatural manner. But before this happened we

had had a slight disappointment. In the little silver jug was cream, in

the larger one was milk. As soon as Mr Mulliner came in, Carlo began to

beg, which was a thing our manners forbade us to do, though I am sure we

were just as hungry; and Mrs Jamieson said she was certain we would

excuse her if she gave her poor dumb Carlo his tea first. She

accordingly mixed a saucerful for him, and put it down for him to lap;

and then she told us how intelligent and sensible the dear little fellow

was; he knew cream quite well, and constantly refused tea with only milk

in it: so the milk was left for us; but we silently thought we were

quite as intelligent and sensible as Carlo, and felt as if insult were

added to injury when we were called upon to admire the gratitude evinced

by his wagging his tail for the cream which should have been ours.

After tea we thawed down into common-life subjects. We were thankful to

Lady Glenmire for having proposed some more bread and butter, and this

mutual want made us better acquainted with her than we should ever have

been with talking about the Court, though Miss Pole did say she had

hoped to know how the dear Queen was from some one who had seen her.

The friendship begun over bread and butter extended on to cards. Lady

Glenmire played Preference to admiration, and was a complete authority

as to Ombre and Quadrille. Even Miss Pole quite forgot to say “my

lady,” and “your ladyship,” and said “Basto! ma’am”; “you have Spadille,

I believe,” just as quietly as if we had never held the great Cranford

Parliament on the subject of the proper mode of addressing a peeress.

As a proof of how thoroughly we had forgotten that we were in the

presence of one who might have sat down to tea with a coronet, instead

of a cap, on her head, Mrs Forrester related a curious little fact to

Lady Glenmire—an anecdote known to the circle of her intimate friends,

but of which even Mrs Jamieson was not aware. It related to some fine

old lace, the sole relic of better days, which Lady Glenmire was

admiring on Mrs Forrester’s collar.

“Yes,” said that lady, “such lace cannot be got now for either love or

money; made by the nuns abroad, they tell me. They say that they can’t

make it now even there. But perhaps they can, now they’ve passed the

Catholic Emancipation Bill. I should not wonder. But, in the meantime,

I treasure up my lace very much. I daren’t even trust the washing of it

to my maid” (the little charity school-girl I have named before, but who

sounded well as “my maid”). “I always wash it myself. And once it had

a narrow escape. Of course, your ladyship knows that such lace must

never be starched or ironed. Some people wash it in sugar and water,

and some in coffee, to make it the right yellow colour; but I myself

have a very good receipt for washing it in milk, which stiffens it

enough, and gives it a very good creamy colour. Well, ma’am, I had

tacked it together (and the beauty of this fine lace is that, when it is

wet, it goes into a very little space), and put it to soak in milk,

when, unfortunately, I left the room; on my return, I found pussy on the

table, looking very like a thief, but gulping very uncomfortably, as if

she was half-chocked with something she wanted to swallow and could not.

And, would you believe it? At first I pitied her, and said ‘Poor

pussy! poor pussy!’ till, all at once, I looked and saw the cup of milk

empty—cleaned out! ‘You naughty cat!’ said I, and I believe I was

provoked enough to give her a slap, which did no good, but only helped

the lace down—just as one slaps a choking child on the back. I could

have cried, I was so vexed; but I determined I would not give the lace

up without a struggle for it. I hoped the lace might disagree with her,

at any rate; but it would have been too much for Job, if he had seen, as

I did, that cat come in, quite placid and purring, not a quarter of an

hour after, and almost expecting to be stroked. ‘No, pussy!’ said I,

‘if you have any conscience you ought not to expect that!’ And then a

thought struck me; and I rang the bell for my maid, and sent her to Mr

Hoggins, with my compliments, and would he be kind enough to lend me one

of his top-boots for an hour? I did not think there was anything odd in

the message; but Jenny said the young men in the surgery laughed as if

they would be ill at my wanting a top-boot. When it came, Jenny and I

put pussy in, with her forefeet straight down, so that they were

fastened, and could not scratch, and we gave her a teaspoonful of

current-jelly in which (your ladyship must excuse me) I had mixed some

tartar emetic. I shall never forget how anxious I was for the next

half-hour. I took pussy to my own room, and spread a clean towel on the

floor. I could have kissed her when she returned the lace to sight,

very much as it had gone down. Jenny had boiling water ready, and we

soaked it and soaked it, and spread it on a lavender-bush in the sun

before I could touch it again, even to put it in milk. But now your

ladyship would never guess that it had been in pussy’s inside.”

[Picture: We gave her a teaspoonful of current-jelly]

We found out, in the course of the evening, that Lady Glenmire was going

to pay Mrs Jamieson a long visit, as she had given up her apartments in

Edinburgh, and had no ties to take her back there in a hurry. On the

whole, we were rather glad to hear this, for she had made a pleasant

impression upon us; and it was also very comfortable to find, from

things which dropped out in the course of conversation, that, in

addition to many other genteel qualities, she was far removed from the

“vulgarity of wealth.”

“Don’t you find it very unpleasant walking?” asked Mrs Jamieson, as our

respective servants were announced. It was a pretty regular question

from Mrs Jamieson, who had her own carriage in the coach-house, and

always went out in a sedan-chair to the very shortest distances. The

answers were nearly as much a matter of course.

“Oh dear, no! it is so pleasant and still at night!” “Such a

refreshment after the excitement of a party!” “The stars are so

beautiful!” This last was from Miss Matty.

“Are you fond of astronomy?” Lady Glenmire asked.

“Not very,” replied Miss Matty, rather confused at the moment to

remember which was astronomy and which was astrology—but the answer was

true under either circumstance, for she read, and was slightly alarmed

at Francis Moore’s astrological predictions; and, as to astronomy, in a

private and confidential conversation, she had told me she never could

believe that the earth was moving constantly, and that she would not

believe it if she could, it made her feel so tired and dizzy whenever

she thought about it.

In our pattens we picked our way home with extra care that night, so

refined and delicate were our perceptions after drinking tea with “my

lady.”

CHAPTER IX.

SIGNOR BRUNONI

SOON after the events of which I gave an account in my last paper, I was

summoned home by my father’s illness; and for a time I forgot, in

anxiety about him, to wonder how my dear friends at Cranford were

getting on, or how Lady Glenmire could reconcile herself to the dulness

of the long visit which she was still paying to her sister-in-law, Mrs

Jamieson. When my father grew a little stronger I accompanied him to the

seaside, so that altogether I seemed banished from Cranford, and was

deprived of the opportunity of hearing any chance intelligence of the

dear little town for the greater part of that year.

Late in November—when we had returned home again, and my father was once

more in good health—I received a letter from Miss Matty; and a very

mysterious letter it was. She began many sentences without ending them,

running them one into another, in much the same confused sort of way in

which written words run together on blotting-paper. All I could make

out was that, if my father was better (which she hoped he was), and

would take warning and wear a great-coat from Michaelmas to Lady-day, if

turbans were in fashion, could I tell her? Such a piece of gaiety was

going to happen as had not been seen or known of since Wombwell’s lions

came, when one of them ate a little child’s arm; and she was, perhaps,

too old to care about dress, but a new cap she must have; and, having

heard that turbans were worn, and some of the county families likely to

come, she would like to look tidy, if I would bring her a cap from the

milliner I employed; and oh, dear! how careless of her to forget that

she wrote to beg I would come and pay her a visit next Tuesday; when she

hoped to have something to offer me in the way of amusement, which she

would not now more particularly describe, only sea-green was her

favourite colour. So she ended her letter; but in a P.S. she added, she

thought she might as well tell me what was the peculiar attraction to

Cranford just now; Signor Brunoni was going to exhibit his wonderful

magic in the Cranford Assembly Rooms on Wednesday and Friday evening in

the following week.

I was very glad to accept the invitation from my dear Miss Matty,

independently of the conjuror, and most particularly anxious to prevent

her from disfiguring her small, gentle, mousey face with a great

Saracen’s head turban; and accordingly, I bought her a pretty, neat,

middle-aged cap, which, however, was rather a disappointment to her

when, on my arrival, she followed me into my bedroom, ostensibly to poke

the fire, but in reality, I do believe, to see if the sea-green turban

was not inside the cap-box with which I had travelled. It was in vain

that I twirled the cap round on my hand to exhibit back and side fronts:

her heart had been set upon a turban, and all she could do was to say,

with resignation in her look and voice—

“I am sure you did your best, my dear. It is just like the caps all the

ladies in Cranford are wearing, and they have had theirs for a year, I

dare say. I should have liked something newer, I confess—something more

like the turbans Miss Betty Barker tells me Queen Adelaide wears; but it

is very pretty, my dear. And I dare say lavender will wear better than

sea-green. Well, after all, what is dress, that we should care anything

about it? You’ll tell me if you want anything, my dear. Here is the

bell. I suppose turbans have not got down to Drumble yet?”

So saying, the dear old lady gently bemoaned herself out of the room,

leaving me to dress for the evening, when, as she informed me, she

expected Miss Pole and Mrs Forrester, and she hoped I should not feel

myself too much tired to join the party. Of course I should not; and I

made some haste to unpack and arrange my dress; but, with all my speed,

I heard the arrivals and the buzz of conversation in the next room

before I was ready. Just as I opened the door, I caught the words, “I

was foolish to expect anything very genteel out of the Drumble shops;

poor girl! she did her best, I’ve no doubt.” But, for all that, I had

rather that she blamed Drumble and me than disfigured herself with a

turban.

Miss Pole was always the person, in the trio of Cranford ladies now

assembled, to have had adventures. She was in the habit of spending the

morning in rambling from shop to shop, not to purchase anything (except

an occasional reel of cotton or a piece of tape), but to see the new

articles and report upon them, and to collect all the stray pieces of

intelligence in the town. She had a way, too, of demurely popping

hither and thither into all sorts of places to gratify her curiosity on

any point—a way which, if she had not looked so very genteel and prim,

might have been considered impertinent. And now, by the expressive way

in which she cleared her throat, and waited for all minor subjects (such

as caps and turbans) to be cleared off the course, we knew she had

something very particular to relate, when the due pause came—and I defy

any people possessed of common modesty to keep up a conversation long,

where one among them sits up aloft in silence, looking down upon all the

things they chance to say as trivial and contemptible compared to what

they could disclose, if properly entreated. Miss Pole began—

“As I was stepping out of Gordon’s shop to-day, I chanced to go into the

‘George’ (my Betty has a second-cousin who is chambermaid there, and I

thought Betty would like to hear how she was), and, not seeing anyone

about, I strolled up the staircase, and found myself in the passage

leading to the Assembly Room (you and I remember the Assembly Room, I am

sure, Miss Matty! and the minuets de la cour!); so I went on, not

thinking of what I was about, when, all at once, I perceived that I was

in the middle of the preparations for to-morrow night—the room being

divided with great clothes-maids, over which Crosby’s men were tacking

red flannel; very dark and odd it seemed; it quite bewildered me, and I

was going on behind the screens, in my absence of mind, when a

gentleman (quite the gentleman, I can assure you) stepped forwards and

asked if I had any business he could arrange for me. He spoke such

pretty broken English, I could not help thinking of Thaddeus of Warsaw,

and the Hungarian Brothers, and Santo Sebastiani; and while I was busy

picturing his past life to myself, he had bowed me out of the room. But

wait a minute! You have not heard half my story yet! I was going

downstairs, when who should I meet but Betty’s second-cousin. So, of

course, I stopped to speak to her for Betty’s sake; and she told me that

I had really seen the conjuror—the gentleman who spoke broken English

was Signor Brunoni himself. Just at this moment he passed us on the

stairs, making such a graceful bow! in reply to which I dropped a

curtsey—all foreigners have such polite manners, one catches something

of it. But when he had gone downstairs, I bethought me that I had

dropped my glove in the Assembly Room (it was safe in my muff all the

time, but I never found it till afterwards); so I went back, and, just

as I was creeping up the passage left on one side of the great screen

that goes nearly across the room, who should I see but the very same

gentleman that had met me before, and passed me on the stairs, coming

now forwards from the inner part of the room, to which there is no

entrance—you remember, Miss Matty—and just repeating, in his pretty

broken English, the inquiry if I had any business there—I don’t mean

that he put it quite so bluntly, but he seemed very determined that I

should not pass the screen—so, of course, I explained about my glove,

which, curiously enough, I found at that very moment.”

Miss Pole, then, had seen the conjuror—the real, live conjuror! and

numerous were the questions we all asked her. “Had he a beard?” “Was

he young, or old?” “Fair, or dark?” “Did he look”—(unable to shape my

question prudently, I put it in another form)—“How did he look?” In

short, Miss Pole was the heroine of the evening, owing to her morning’s

encounter. If she was not the rose (that is to say the conjuror) she

had been near it.

Conjuration, sleight of hand, magic, witchcraft, were the subjects of

the evening. Miss Pole was slightly sceptical, and inclined to think

there might be a scientific solution found for even the proceedings of

the Witch of Endor. Mrs Forrester believed everything, from ghosts to

death-watches. Miss Matty ranged between the two—always convinced by

the last speaker. I think she was naturally more inclined to Mrs

Forrester’s side, but a desire of proving herself a worthy sister to

Miss Jenkyns kept her equally balanced—Miss Jenkyns, who would never

allow a servant to call the little rolls of tallow that formed

themselves round candles “winding-sheets,” but insisted on their being

spoken of as “roley-poleys!” A sister of hers to be superstitious! It

would never do.

After tea, I was despatched downstairs into the dining-parlour for that

volume of the old Encyclopædia which contained the nouns beginning with

C, in order that Miss Pole might prime herself with scientific

explanations for the tricks of the following evening. It spoilt the

pool at Preference which Miss Matty and Mrs Forrester had been looking

forward to, for Miss Pole became so much absorbed in her subject, and

the plates by which it was illustrated, that we felt it would be cruel

to disturb her otherwise than by one or two well-timed yawns, which I

threw in now and then, for I was really touched by the meek way in which

the two ladies were bearing their disappointment. But Miss Pole only

read the more zealously, imparting to us no more information than this—

“Ah! I see; I comprehend perfectly. A represents the ball. Put A

between B and D—no! between C and F, and turn the second joint of the

third finger of your left hand over the wrist of your right H. Very

clear indeed! My dear Mrs Forrester, conjuring and witchcraft is a mere

affair of the alphabet. Do let me read you this one passage?”

Mrs Forrester implored Miss Pole to spare her, saying, from a child

upwards, she never could understand being read aloud to; and I dropped

the pack of cards, which I had been shuffling very audibly, and by this

discreet movement I obliged Miss Pole to perceive that Preference was to

have been the order of the evening, and to propose, rather unwillingly,

that the pool should commence. The pleasant brightness that stole over

the other two ladies’ faces on this! Miss Matty had one or two twinges

of self-reproach for having interrupted Miss Pole in her studies: and

did not remember her cards well, or give her full attention to the game,

until she had soothed her conscience by offering to lend the volume of

the Encyclopædia to Miss Pole, who accepted it thankfully, and said

Betty should take it home when she came with the lantern.

The next evening we were all in a little gentle flutter at the idea of

the gaiety before us. Miss Matty went up to dress betimes, and hurried

me until I was ready, when we found we had an hour-and-a-half to wait

before the “doors opened at seven precisely.” And we had only twenty

yards to go! However, as Miss Matty said, it would not do to get too

much absorbed in anything, and forget the time; so she thought we had

better sit quietly, without lighting the candles, till five minutes to

seven. So Miss Matty dozed, and I knitted.

At length we set off; and at the door under the carriage-way at the

“George,” we met Mrs Forrester and Miss Pole: the latter was discussing

the subject of the evening with more vehemence than ever, and throwing

X’s and B’s at our heads like hailstones. She had even copied one or

two of the “receipts”—as she called them—for the different tricks, on

backs of letters, ready to explain and to detect Signor Brunoni’s arts.

We went into the cloak-room adjoining the Assembly Room; Miss Matty gave

a sigh or two to her departed youth, and the remembrance of the last

time she had been there, as she adjusted her pretty new cap before the

strange, quaint old mirror in the cloak-room. The Assembly Room had

been added to the inn, about a hundred years before, by the different

county families, who met together there once a month during the winter

to dance and play at cards. Many a county beauty had first swung

through the minuet that she afterwards danced before Queen Charlotte in

this very room. It was said that one of the Gunnings had graced the

apartment with her beauty; it was certain that a rich and beautiful

widow, Lady Williams, had here been smitten with the noble figure of a

young artist, who was staying with some family in the neighbourhood for

professional purposes, and accompanied his patrons to the Cranford

Assembly. And a pretty bargain poor Lady Williams had of her handsome

husband, if all tales were true. Now, no beauty blushed and dimpled

along the sides of the Cranford Assembly Room; no handsome artist won

hearts by his bow, \_chapeau bras\_ in hand; the old room was dingy; the

salmon-coloured paint had faded into a drab; great pieces of plaster had

chipped off from the fine wreaths and festoons on its walls; but still a

mouldy odour of aristocracy lingered about the place, and a dusty

recollection of the days that were gone made Miss Matty and Mrs

Forrester bridle up as they entered, and walk mincingly up the room, as

if there were a number of genteel observers, instead of two little boys

with a stick of toffee between them with which to beguile the time.

We stopped short at the second front row; I could hardly understand why,

until I heard Miss Pole ask a stray waiter if any of the county families

were expected; and when he shook his head, and believed not, Mrs

Forrester and Miss Matty moved forwards, and our party represented a

conversational square. The front row was soon augmented and enriched by

Lady Glenmire and Mrs Jamieson. We six occupied the two front rows, and

our aristocratic seclusion was respected by the groups of shopkeepers

who strayed in from time to time and huddled together on the back

benches. At least I conjectured so, from the noise they made, and the

sonorous bumps they gave in sitting down; but when, in weariness of the

obstinate green curtain that would not draw up, but would stare at me

with two odd eyes, seen through holes, as in the old tapestry story, I

would fain have looked round at the merry chattering people behind me,

Miss Pole clutched my arm, and begged me not to turn, for “it was not

the thing.” What “the thing” was, I never could find out, but it must

have been something eminently dull and tiresome. However, we all sat

eyes right, square front, gazing at the tantalising curtain, and hardly

speaking intelligibly, we were so afraid of being caught in the

vulgarity of making any noise in a place of public amusement. Mrs

Jamieson was the most fortunate, for she fell asleep.

At length the eyes disappeared—the curtain quivered—one side went up

before the other, which stuck fast; it was dropped again, and, with a

fresh effort, and a vigorous pull from some unseen hand, it flew up,

revealing to our sight a magnificent gentleman in the Turkish costume,

seated before a little table, gazing at us (I should have said with the

same eyes that I had last seen through the hole in the curtain) with

calm and condescending dignity, “like a being of another sphere,” as I

heard a sentimental voice ejaculate behind me.

“That’s not Signor Brunoni!” said Miss Pole decidedly; and so audibly

that I am sure he heard, for he glanced down over his flowing beard at

our party with an air of mute reproach. “Signor Brunoni had no

beard—but perhaps he’ll come soon.” So she lulled herself into

patience. Meanwhile, Miss Matty had reconnoitred through her eye-glass,

wiped it, and looked again. Then she turned round, and said to me, in a

kind, mild, sorrowful tone—

“You see, my dear, turbans \_are\_ worn.”

But we had no time for more conversation. The Grand Turk, as Miss Pole

chose to call him, arose and announced himself as Signor Brunoni.

“I don’t believe him!” exclaimed Miss Pole, in a defiant manner. He

looked at her again, with the same dignified upbraiding in his

countenance. “I don’t!” she repeated more positively than ever.

“Signor Brunoni had not got that muffy sort of thing about his chin, but

looked like a close-shaved Christian gentleman.”

Miss Pole’s energetic speeches had the good effect of wakening up Mrs

Jamieson, who opened her eyes wide, in sign of the deepest attention—a

proceeding which silenced Miss Pole and encouraged the Grand Turk to

proceed, which he did in very broken English—so broken that there was no

cohesion between the parts of his sentences; a fact which he himself

perceived at last, and so left off speaking and proceeded to action.

Now we \_were\_ astonished. How he did his tricks I could not imagine;

no, not even when Miss Pole pulled out her pieces of paper and began

reading aloud—or at least in a very audible whisper—the separate

“receipts” for the most common of his tricks. If ever I saw a man frown

and look enraged, I saw the Grand Turk frown at Miss Pole; but, as she

said, what could be expected but unchristian looks from a Mussulman? If

Miss Pole were sceptical, and more engrossed with her receipts and

diagrams than with his tricks, Miss Matty and Mrs Forrester were

mystified and perplexed to the highest degree. Mrs Jamieson kept taking

her spectacles off and wiping them, as if she thought it was something

defective in them which made the legerdemain; and Lady Glenmire, who had

seen many curious sights in Edinburgh, was very much struck with the

tricks, and would not at all agree with Miss Pole, who declared that

anybody could do them with a little practice, and that she would,

herself, undertake to do all he did, with two hours given to study the

Encyclopædia and make her third finger flexible.

At last Miss Matty and Mrs Forrester became perfectly awestricken. They

whispered together. I sat just behind them, so I could not help hearing

what they were saying. Miss Matty asked Mrs Forrester “if she thought

it was quite right to have come to see such things? She could not help

fearing they were lending encouragement to something that was not

quite”— A little shake of the head filled up the blank. Mrs Forrester

replied, that the same thought had crossed her mind; she too was feeling

very uncomfortable, it was so very strange. She was quite certain that

it was her pocket-handkerchief which was in that loaf just now; and it

had been in her own hand not five minutes before. She wondered who had

furnished the bread? She was sure it could not be Dakin, because he was

the churchwarden. Suddenly Miss Matty half-turned towards me—

“Will you look, my dear—you are a stranger in the town, and it won’t

give rise to unpleasant reports—will you just look round and see if the

rector is here? If he is, I think we may conclude that this wonderful

man is sanctioned by the Church, and that will be a great relief to my

mind.”

I looked, and I saw the tall, thin, dry, dusty rector, sitting

surrounded by National School boys, guarded by troops of his own sex

from any approach of the many Cranford spinsters. His kind face was all

agape with broad smiles, and the boys around him were in chinks of

laughing. I told Miss Matty that the Church was smiling approval, which

set her mind at ease.

[Picture: Afraid of matrimonial reports]

I have never named Mr Hayter, the rector, because I, as a well-to-do and

happy young woman, never came in contact with him. He was an old

bachelor, but as afraid of matrimonial reports getting abroad about him

as any girl of eighteen: and he would rush into a shop or dive down an

entry, sooner than encounter any of the Cranford ladies in the street;

and, as for the Preference parties, I did not wonder at his not

accepting invitations to them. To tell the truth, I always suspected

Miss Pole of having given very vigorous chase to Mr Hayter when he first

came to Cranford; and not the less, because now she appeared to share so

vividly in his dread lest her name should ever be coupled with his. He

found all his interests among the poor and helpless; he had treated the

National School boys this very night to the performance; and virtue was

for once its own reward, for they guarded him right and left, and clung

round him as if he had been the queen-bee and they the swarm. He felt

so safe in their environment that he could even afford to give our party

a bow as we filed out. Miss Pole ignored his presence, and pretended to

be absorbed in convincing us that we had been cheated, and had not seen

Signor Brunoni after all.

CHAPTER X.

THE PANIC

I THINK a series of circumstances dated from Signor Brunoni’s visit to

Cranford, which seemed at the time connected in our minds with him,

though I don’t know that he had anything really to do with them. All at

once all sorts of uncomfortable rumours got afloat in the town. There

were one or two robberies—real \_bonâ fide\_ robberies; men had up before

the magistrates and committed for trial—and that seemed to make us all

afraid of being robbed; and for a long time, at Miss Matty’s, I know, we

used to make a regular expedition all round the kitchens and cellars

every night, Miss Matty leading the way, armed with the poker, I

following with the hearth-brush, and Martha carrying the shovel and

fire-irons with which to sound the alarm; and by the accidental hitting

together of them she often frightened us so much that we bolted

ourselves up, all three together, in the back-kitchen, or store-room, or

wherever we happened to be, till, when our affright was over, we

recollected ourselves and set out afresh with double valiance. By day

we heard strange stories from the shopkeepers and cottagers, of carts

that went about in the dead of night, drawn by horses shod with felt,

and guarded by men in dark clothes, going round the town, no doubt in

search of some unwatched house or some unfastened door.

Miss Pole, who affected great bravery herself, was the principal person

to collect and arrange these reports so as to make them assume their

most fearful aspect. But we discovered that she had begged one of Mr

Hoggins’s worn-out hats to hang up in her lobby, and we (at least I) had

doubts as to whether she really would enjoy the little adventure of

having her house broken into, as she protested she should. Miss Matty

made no secret of being an arrant coward, but she went regularly through

her housekeeper’s duty of inspection—only the hour for this became

earlier and earlier, till at last we went the rounds at half-past six,

and Miss Matty adjourned to bed soon after seven, “in order to get the

night over the sooner.”

Cranford had so long piqued itself on being an honest and moral town

that it had grown to fancy itself too genteel and well-bred to be

otherwise, and felt the stain upon its character at this time doubly.

But we comforted ourselves with the assurance which we gave to each

other that the robberies could never have been committed by any Cranford

person; it must have been a stranger or strangers who brought this

disgrace upon the town, and occasioned as many precautions as if we were

living among the Red Indians or the French.

This last comparison of our nightly state of defence and fortification

was made by Mrs Forrester, whose father had served under General

Burgoyne in the American war, and whose husband had fought the French in

Spain. She indeed inclined to the idea that, in some way, the French

were connected with the small thefts, which were ascertained facts, and

the burglaries and highway robberies, which were rumours. She had been

deeply impressed with the idea of French spies at some time in her life;

and the notion could never be fairly eradicated, but sprang up again

from time to time. And now her theory was this:—The Cranford people

respected themselves too much, and were too grateful to the aristocracy

who were so kind as to live near the town, ever to disgrace their

bringing up by being dishonest or immoral; therefore, we must believe

that the robbers were strangers—if strangers, why not foreigners?—if

foreigners, who so likely as the French? Signor Brunoni spoke broken

English like a Frenchman; and, though he wore a turban like a Turk, Mrs

Forrester had seen a print of Madame de Staël with a turban on, and

another of Mr Denon in just such a dress as that in which the conjuror

had made his appearance, showing clearly that the French, as well as the

Turks, wore turbans. There could be no doubt Signor Brunoni was a

Frenchman—a French spy come to discover the weak and undefended places

of England, and doubtless he had his accomplices. For her part, she,

Mrs Forrester, had always had her own opinion of Miss Pole’s adventure

at the “George Inn”—seeing two men where only one was believed to be.

French people had ways and means which, she was thankful to say, the

English knew nothing about; and she had never felt quite easy in her

mind about going to see that conjuror—it was rather too much like a

forbidden thing, though the rector was there. In short, Mrs Forrester

grew more excited than we had ever known her before, and, being an

officer’s daughter and widow, we looked up to her opinion, of course.

Really I do not know how much was true or false in the reports which

flew about like wildfire just at this time; but it seemed to me then

that there was every reason to believe that at Mardon (a small town

about eight miles from Cranford) houses and shops were entered by holes

made in the walls, the bricks being silently carried away in the dead of

the night, and all done so quietly that no sound was heard either in or

out of the house. Miss Matty gave it up in despair when she heard of

this. “What was the use,” said she, “of locks and bolts, and bells to

the windows, and going round the house every night? That last trick was

fit for a conjuror. Now she did believe that Signor Brunoni was at the

bottom of it.”

One afternoon, about five o’clock, we were startled by a hasty knock at

the door. Miss Matty bade me run and tell Martha on no account to open

the door till she (Miss Matty) had reconnoitred through the window; and

she armed herself with a footstool to drop down on the head of the

visitor, in case he should show a face covered with black crape, as he

looked up in answer to her inquiry of who was there. But it was nobody

but Miss Pole and Betty. The former came upstairs, carrying a little

hand-basket, and she was evidently in a state of great agitation.

“Take care of that!” said she to me, as I offered to relieve her of her

basket. “It’s my plate. I am sure there is a plan to rob my house

to-night. I am come to throw myself on your hospitality, Miss Matty.

Betty is going to sleep with her cousin at the ‘George.’ I can sit up

here all night if you will allow me; but my house is so far from any

neighbours, and I don’t believe we could be heard if we screamed ever

so!”

“But,” said Miss Matty, “what has alarmed you so much? Have you seen

any men lurking about the house?”

“Oh, yes!” answered Miss Pole. “Two very bad-looking men have gone

three times past the house, very slowly; and an Irish beggar-woman came

not half-an-hour ago, and all but forced herself in past Betty, saying

her children were starving, and she must speak to the mistress. You

see, she said ‘mistress,’ though there was a hat hanging up in the hall,

and it would have been more natural to have said ‘master.’ But Betty

shut the door in her face, and came up to me, and we got the spoons

together, and sat in the parlour-window watching till we saw Thomas

Jones going from his work, when we called to him and asked him to take

care of us into the town.”

We might have triumphed over Miss Pole, who had professed such bravery

until she was frightened; but we were too glad to perceive that she

shared in the weaknesses of humanity to exult over her; and I gave up my

room to her very willingly, and shared Miss Matty’s bed for the night.

But before we retired, the two ladies rummaged up, out of the recesses

of their memory, such horrid stories of robbery and murder that I quite

quaked in my shoes. Miss Pole was evidently anxious to prove that such

terrible events had occurred within her experience that she was

justified in her sudden panic; and Miss Matty did not like to be

outdone, and capped every story with one yet more horrible, till it

reminded me oddly enough, of an old story I had read somewhere, of a

nightingale and a musician, who strove one against the other which could

produce the most admirable music, till poor Philomel dropped down dead.

One of the stories that haunted me for a long time afterwards was of a

girl who was left in charge of a great house in Cumberland on some

particular fair-day, when the other servants all went off to the

gaieties. The family were away in London, and a pedlar came by, and

asked to leave his large and heavy pack in the kitchen, saying he would

call for it again at night; and the girl (a gamekeeper’s daughter),

roaming about in search of amusement, chanced to hit upon a gun hanging

up in the hall, and took it down to look at the chasing; and it went off

through the open kitchen door, hit the pack, and a slow dark thread of

blood came oozing out. (How Miss Pole enjoyed this part of the story,

dwelling on each word as if she loved it!) She rather hurried over the

further account of the girl’s bravery, and I have but a confused idea

that, somehow, she baffled the robbers with Italian irons, heated

red-hot, and then restored to blackness by being dipped in grease.

We parted for the night with an awe-stricken wonder as to what we should

hear of in the morning—and, on my part, with a vehement desire for the

night to be over and gone: I was so afraid lest the robbers should have

seen, from some dark lurking-place, that Miss Pole had carried off her

plate, and thus have a double motive for attacking our house.

[Picture: Asked him to take care of us]

But until Lady Glenmire came to call next day we heard of nothing

unusual. The kitchen fire-irons were in exactly the same position

against the back door as when Martha and I had skilfully piled them up,

like spillikins, ready to fall with an awful clatter if only a cat had

touched the outside panels. I had wondered what we should all do if

thus awakened and alarmed, and had proposed to Miss Matty that we should

cover up our faces under the bed-clothes so that there should be no

danger of the robbers thinking that we could identify them; but Miss

Matty, who was trembling very much, scouted this idea, and said we owed

it to society to apprehend them, and that she should certainly do her

best to lay hold of them and lock them up in the garret till morning.

When Lady Glenmire came, we almost felt jealous of her. Mrs Jamieson’s

house had really been attacked; at least there were men’s footsteps to

be seen on the flower borders, underneath the kitchen windows, “where

nae men should be;” and Carlo had barked all through the night as if

strangers were abroad. Mrs Jamieson had been awakened by Lady Glenmire,

and they had rung the bell which communicated with Mr Mulliner’s room in

the third storey, and when his night-capped head had appeared over the

bannisters, in answer to the summons, they had told him of their alarm,

and the reasons for it; whereupon he retreated into his bedroom, and

locked the door (for fear of draughts, as he informed them in the

morning), and opened the window, and called out valiantly to say, if the

supposed robbers would come to him he would fight them; but, as Lady

Glenmire observed, that was but poor comfort, since they would have to

pass by Mrs Jamieson’s room and her own before they could reach him, and

must be of a very pugnacious disposition indeed if they neglected the

opportunities of robbery presented by the unguarded lower storeys, to go

up to a garret, and there force a door in order to get at the champion

of the house. Lady Glenmire, after waiting and listening for some time

in the drawing-room, had proposed to Mrs Jamieson that they should go to

bed; but that lady said she should not feel comfortable unless she sat

up and watched; and, accordingly, she packed herself warmly up on the

sofa, where she was found by the housemaid, when she came into the room

at six o’clock, fast asleep; but Lady Glenmire went to bed, and kept

awake all night.

When Miss Pole heard of this, she nodded her head in great satisfaction.

She had been sure we should hear of something happening in Cranford that

night; and we had heard. It was clear enough they had first proposed to

attack her house; but when they saw that she and Betty were on their

guard, and had carried off the plate, they had changed their tactics and

gone to Mrs Jamieson’s, and no one knew what might have happened if

Carlo had not barked, like a good dog as he was!

Poor Carlo! his barking days were nearly over. Whether the gang who

infested the neighbourhood were afraid of him, or whether they were

revengeful enough, for the way in which he had baffled them on the night

in question, to poison him; or whether, as some among the more

uneducated people thought, he died of apoplexy, brought on by too much

feeding and too little exercise; at any rate, it is certain that, two

days after this eventful night, Carlo was found dead, with his poor legs

stretched out stiff in the attitude of running, as if by such unusual

exertion he could escape the sure pursuer, Death.

We were all sorry for Carlo, the old familiar friend who had snapped at

us for so many years; and the mysterious mode of his death made us very

uncomfortable. Could Signor Brunoni be at the bottom of this? He had

apparently killed a canary with only a word of command; his will seemed

of deadly force; who knew but what he might yet be lingering in the

neighbourhood willing all sorts of awful things!

We whispered these fancies among ourselves in the evenings; but in the

mornings our courage came back with the daylight, and in a week’s time

we had got over the shock of Carlo’s death; all but Mrs Jamieson. She,

poor thing, felt it as she had felt no event since her husband’s death;

indeed, Miss Pole said, that as the Honourable Mr Jamieson drank a good

deal, and occasioned her much uneasiness, it was possible that Carlo’s

death might be the greater affliction. But there was always a tinge of

cynicism in Miss Pole’s remarks. However, one thing was clear and

certain—it was necessary for Mrs Jamieson to have some change of scene;

and Mr Mulliner was very impressive on this point, shaking his head

whenever we inquired after his mistress, and speaking of her loss of

appetite and bad nights very ominously; and with justice too, for if she

had two characteristics in her natural state of health they were a

facility of eating and sleeping. If she could neither eat nor sleep,

she must be indeed out of spirits and out of health.

Lady Glenmire (who had evidently taken very kindly to Cranford) did not

like the idea of Mrs Jamieson’s going to Cheltenham, and more than once

insinuated pretty plainly that it was Mr Mulliner’s doing, who had been

much alarmed on the occasion of the house being attacked, and since had

said, more than once, that he felt it a very responsible charge to have

to defend so many women. Be that as it might, Mrs Jamieson went to

Cheltenham, escorted by Mr Mulliner; and Lady Glenmire remained in

possession of the house, her ostensible office being to take care that

the maid-servants did not pick up followers. She made a very

pleasant-looking dragon; and, as soon as it was arranged for her stay in

Cranford, she found out that Mrs Jamieson’s visit to Cheltenham was just

the best thing in the world. She had let her house in Edinburgh, and

was for the time house-less, so the charge of her sister-in-law’s

comfortable abode was very convenient and acceptable.

Miss Pole was very much inclined to instal herself as a heroine, because

of the decided steps she had taken in flying from the two men and one

woman, whom she entitled “that murderous gang.” She described their

appearance in glowing colours, and I noticed that every time she went

over the story some fresh trait of villainy was added to their

appearance. One was tall—he grew to be gigantic in height before we had

done with him; he of course had black hair—and by-and-by it hung in

elf-locks over his forehead and down his back. The other was short and

broad—and a hump sprouted out on his shoulder before we heard the last

of him; he had red hair—which deepened into carroty; and she was almost

sure he had a cast in the eye—a decided squint. As for the woman, her

eyes glared, and she was masculine-looking—a perfect virago; most

probably a man dressed in woman’s clothes; afterwards, we heard of a

beard on her chin, and a manly voice and a stride.

If Miss Pole was delighted to recount the events of that afternoon to

all inquirers, others were not so proud of their adventures in the

robbery line. Mr Hoggins, the surgeon, had been attacked at his own

door by two ruffians, who were concealed in the shadow of the porch, and

so effectually silenced him that he was robbed in the interval between

ringing his bell and the servant’s answering it. Miss Pole was sure it

would turn out that this robbery had been committed by “her men,” and

went the very day she heard the report to have her teeth examined, and

to question Mr Hoggins. She came to us afterwards; so we heard what she

had heard, straight and direct from the source, while we were yet in the

excitement and flutter of the agitation caused by the first

intelligence; for the event had only occurred the night before.

“Well!” said Miss Pole, sitting down with the decision of a person who

has made up her mind as to the nature of life and the world (and such

people never tread lightly, or seat themselves without a bump), “well,

Miss Matty! men will be men. Every mother’s son of them wishes to be

considered Samson and Solomon rolled into one—too strong ever to be

beaten or discomfited—too wise ever to be outwitted. If you will

notice, they have always foreseen events, though they never tell one for

one’s warning before the events happen. My father was a man, and I know

the sex pretty well.”

She had talked herself out of breath, and we should have been very glad

to fill up the necessary pause as chorus, but we did not exactly know

what to say, or which man had suggested this diatribe against the sex;

so we only joined in generally, with a grave shake of the head, and a

soft murmur of “They are very incomprehensible, certainly!”

“Now, only think,” said she. “There, I have undergone the risk of

having one of my remaining teeth drawn (for one is terribly at the mercy

of any surgeon-dentist; and I, for one, always speak them fair till I

have got my mouth out of their clutches), and, after all, Mr Hoggins is

too much of a man to own that he was robbed last night.”

“Not robbed!” exclaimed the chorus.

“Don’t tell me!” Miss Pole exclaimed, angry that we could be for a

moment imposed upon. “I believe he was robbed, just as Betty told me,

and he is ashamed to own it; and, to be sure, it was very silly of him

to be robbed just at his own door; I daresay he feels that such a thing

won’t raise him in the eyes of Cranford society, and is anxious to

conceal it—but he need not have tried to impose upon me, by saying I

must have heard an exaggerated account of some petty theft of a neck of

mutton, which, it seems, was stolen out of the safe in his yard last

week; he had the impertinence to add, he believed that that was taken by

the cat. I have no doubt, if I could get at the bottom of it, it was

that Irishman dressed up in woman’s clothes, who came spying about my

house, with the story about the starving children.”

After we had duly condemned the want of candour which Mr Hoggins had

evinced, and abused men in general, taking him for the representative

and type, we got round to the subject about which we had been talking

when Miss Pole came in; namely, how far, in the present disturbed state

of the country, we could venture to accept an invitation which Miss

Matty had just received from Mrs Forrester, to come as usual and keep

the anniversary of her wedding-day by drinking tea with her at five

o’clock, and playing a quiet pool afterwards. Mrs Forrester had said

that she asked us with some diffidence, because the roads were, she

feared, very unsafe. But she suggested that perhaps one of us would not

object to take the sedan, and that the others, by walking briskly, might

keep up with the long trot of the chairmen, and so we might all arrive

safely at Over Place, a suburb of the town. (No; that is too large an

expression: a small cluster of houses separated from Cranford by about

two hundred yards of a dark and lonely lane.) There was no doubt but

that a similar note was awaiting Miss Pole at home; so her call was a

very fortunate affair, as it enabled us to consult together. We would

all much rather have declined this invitation; but we felt that it would

not be quite kind to Mrs Forrester, who would otherwise be left to a

solitary retrospect of her not very happy or fortunate life. Miss Matty

and Miss Pole had been visitors on this occasion for many years, and now

they gallantly determined to nail their colours to the mast, and to go

through Darkness Lane rather than fail in loyalty to their friend.

But when the evening came, Miss Matty (for it was she who was voted into

the chair, as she had a cold), before being shut down in the sedan, like

jack-in-a-box, implored the chairmen, whatever might befall, not to run

away and leave her fastened up there, to be murdered; and even after

they had promised, I saw her tighten her features into the stern

determination of a martyr, and she gave me a melancholy and ominous

shake of the head through the glass. However, we got there safely, only

rather out of breath, for it was who could trot hardest through Darkness

Lane, and I am afraid poor Miss Matty was sadly jolted.

Mrs Forrester had made extra preparations, in acknowledgment of our

exertion in coming to see her through such dangers. The usual forms of

genteel ignorance as to what her servants might send up were all gone

through; and harmony and Preference seemed likely to be the order of the

evening, but for an interesting conversation that began I don’t know

how, but which had relation, of course, to the robbers who infested the

neighbourhood of Cranford.

Having braved the dangers of Darkness Lane, and thus having a little

stock of reputation for courage to fall back upon; and also, I daresay,

desirous of proving ourselves superior to men (\_videlicet\_ Mr Hoggins)

in the article of candour, we began to relate our individual fears, and

the private precautions we each of us took. I owned that my pet

apprehension was eyes—eyes looking at me, and watching me, glittering

out from some dull, flat, wooden surface; and that if I dared to go up

to my looking-glass when I was panic-stricken, I should certainly turn

it round, with its back towards me, for fear of seeing eyes behind me

looking out of the darkness. I saw Miss Matty nerving herself up for a

confession; and at last out it came. She owned that, ever since she had

been a girl, she had dreaded being caught by her last leg, just as she

was getting into bed, by some one concealed under it. She said, when

she was younger and more active, she used to take a flying leap from a

distance, and so bring both her legs up safely into bed at once; but

that this had always annoyed Deborah, who piqued herself upon getting

into bed gracefully, and she had given it up in consequence. But now

the old terror would often come over her, especially since Miss Pole’s

house had been attacked (we had got quite to believe in the fact of the

attack having taken place), and yet it was very unpleasant to think of

looking under a bed, and seeing a man concealed, with a great, fierce

face staring out at you; so she had bethought herself of

something—perhaps I had noticed that she had told Martha to buy her a

penny ball, such as children play with—and now she rolled this ball

under the bed every night: if it came out on the other side, well and

good; if not she always took care to have her hand on the bell-rope, and

meant to call out John and Harry, just as if she expected men-servants

to answer her ring.

We all applauded this ingenious contrivance, and Miss Matty sank back

into satisfied silence, with a look at Mrs Forrester as if to ask for

\_her\_ private weakness.

Mrs Forrester looked askance at Miss Pole, and tried to change the

subject a little by telling us that she had borrowed a boy from one of

the neighbouring cottages and promised his parents a hundredweight of

coals at Christmas, and his supper every evening, for the loan of him at

nights. She had instructed him in his possible duties when he first

came; and, finding him sensible, she had given him the Major’s sword

(the Major was her late husband), and desired him to put it very

carefully behind his pillow at night, turning the edge towards the head

of the pillow. He was a sharp lad, she was sure; for, spying out the

Major’s cocked hat, he had said, if he might have that to wear, he was

sure he could frighten two Englishmen, or four Frenchmen any day. But

she had impressed upon him anew that he was to lose no time in putting

on hats or anything else; but, if he heard any noise, he was to run at

it with his drawn sword. On my suggesting that some accident might

occur from such slaughterous and indiscriminate directions, and that he

might rush on Jenny getting up to wash, and have spitted her before he

had discovered that she was not a Frenchman, Mrs Forrester said she did

not think that that was likely, for he was a very sound sleeper, and

generally had to be well shaken or cold-pigged in a morning before they

could rouse him. She sometimes thought such dead sleep must be owing to

the hearty suppers the poor lad ate, for he was half-starved at home,

and she told Jenny to see that he got a good meal at night.

[Picture: Slaughterous and indiscriminate directions]

Still this was no confession of Mrs Forrester’s peculiar timidity, and

we urged her to tell us what she thought would frighten her more than

anything. She paused, and stirred the fire, and snuffed the candles,

and then she said, in a sounding whisper—

“Ghosts!”

She looked at Miss Pole, as much as to say, she had declared it, and

would stand by it. Such a look was a challenge in itself. Miss Pole

came down upon her with indigestion, spectral illusions, optical

delusions, and a great deal out of Dr Ferrier and Dr Hibbert besides.

Miss Matty had rather a leaning to ghosts, as I have mentioned before,

and what little she did say was all on Mrs Forrester’s side, who,

emboldened by sympathy, protested that ghosts were a part of her

religion; that surely she, the widow of a major in the army, knew what

to be frightened at, and what not; in short, I never saw Mrs Forrester

so warm either before or since, for she was a gentle, meek, enduring old

lady in most things. Not all the elder-wine that ever was mulled could

this night wash out the remembrance of this difference between Miss Pole

and her hostess. Indeed, when the elder-wine was brought in, it gave

rise to a new burst of discussion; for Jenny, the little maiden who

staggered under the tray, had to give evidence of having seen a ghost

with her own eyes, not so many nights ago, in Darkness Lane, the very

lane we were to go through on our way home.

In spite of the uncomfortable feeling which this last consideration gave

me, I could not help being amused at Jenny’s position, which was

exceedingly like that of a witness being examined and cross-examined by

two counsel who are not at all scrupulous about asking leading

questions. The conclusion I arrived at was, that Jenny had certainly

seen something beyond what a fit of indigestion would have caused. A

lady all in white, and without her head, was what she deposed and

adhered to, supported by a consciousness of the secret sympathy of her

mistress under the withering scorn with which Miss Pole regarded her.

And not only she, but many others, had seen this headless lady, who sat

by the roadside wringing her hands as in deep grief. Mrs Forrester

looked at us from time to time with an air of conscious triumph; but

then she had not to pass through Darkness Lane before she could bury

herself beneath her own familiar bed-clothes.

We preserved a discreet silence as to the headless lady while we were

putting on our things to go home, for there was no knowing how near the

ghostly head and ears might be, or what spiritual connection they might

be keeping up with the unhappy body in Darkness Lane; and, therefore,

even Miss Pole felt that it was as well not to speak lightly on such

subjects, for fear of vexing or insulting that woebegone trunk. At

least, so I conjecture; for, instead of the busy clatter usual in the

operation, we tied on our cloaks as sadly as mutes at a funeral. Miss

Matty drew the curtains round the windows of the chair to shut out

disagreeable sights, and the men (either because they were in spirits

that their labours were so nearly ended, or because they were going down

hill), set off at such a round and merry pace, that it was all Miss Pole

and I could do to keep up with them. She had breath for nothing beyond

an imploring “Don’t leave me!” uttered as she clutched my arm so tightly

that I could not have quitted her, ghost or no ghost. What a relief it

was when the men, weary of their burden and their quick trot, stopped

just where Headingley Causeway branches off from Darkness Lane! Miss

Pole unloosed me and caught at one of the men—

“Could not you—could not you take Miss Matty round by Headingley

Causeway?—the pavement in Darkness Lane jolts so, and she is not very

strong.”

A smothered voice was heard from the inside of the chair—

“Oh! pray go on! What is the matter? What is the matter? I will give

you sixpence more to go on very fast; pray don’t stop here.”

“And I’ll give you a shilling,” said Miss Pole, with tremulous dignity,

“if you’ll go by Headingley Causeway.”

The two men grunted acquiescence and took up the chair, and went along

the causeway, which certainly answered Miss Pole’s kind purpose of

saving Miss Matty’s bones; for it was covered with soft, thick mud, and

even a fall there would have been easy till the getting-up came, when

there might have been some difficulty in extrication.

CHAPTER XI.

SAMUEL BROWN

THE next morning I met Lady Glenmire and Miss Pole setting out on a long

walk to find some old woman who was famous in the neighbourhood for her

skill in knitting woollen stockings. Miss Pole said to me, with a smile

half-kindly and half-contemptuous upon her countenance, “I have been

just telling Lady Glenmire of our poor friend Mrs Forrester, and her

terror of ghosts. It comes from living so much alone, and listening to

the bug-a-boo stories of that Jenny of hers.” She was so calm and so

much above superstitious fears herself that I was almost ashamed to say

how glad I had been of her Headingley Causeway proposition the night

before, and turned off the conversation to something else.

In the afternoon Miss Pole called on Miss Matty to tell her of the

adventure—the real adventure they had met with on their morning’s walk.

They had been perplexed about the exact path which they were to take

across the fields in order to find the knitting old woman, and had

stopped to inquire at a little wayside public-house, standing on the

high road to London, about three miles from Cranford. The good woman

had asked them to sit down and rest themselves while she fetched her

husband, who could direct them better than she could; and, while they

were sitting in the sanded parlour, a little girl came in. They thought

that she belonged to the landlady, and began some trifling conversation

with her; but, on Mrs Roberts’s return, she told them that the little

thing was the only child of a couple who were staying in the house. And

then she began a long story, out of which Lady Glenmire and Miss Pole

could only gather one or two decided facts, which were that, about six

weeks ago, a light spring-cart had broken down just before their door,

in which there were two men, one woman, and this child. One of the men

was seriously hurt—no bones broken, only “shaken,” the landlady called

it; but he had probably sustained some severe internal injury, for he

had languished in their house ever since, attended by his wife, the

mother of this little girl. Miss Pole had asked what he was, what he

looked like. And Mrs Roberts had made answer that he was not like a

gentleman, nor yet like a common person; if it had not been that he and

his wife were such decent, quiet people, she could almost have thought

he was a mountebank, or something of that kind, for they had a great box

in the cart, full of she did not know what. She had helped to unpack

it, and take out their linen and clothes, when the other man—his

twin-brother, she believed he was—had gone off with the horse and cart.

Miss Pole had begun to have her suspicions at this point, and expressed

her idea that it was rather strange that the box and cart and horse and

all should have disappeared; but good Mrs Roberts seemed to have become

quite indignant at Miss Pole’s implied suggestion; in fact, Miss Pole

said she was as angry as if Miss Pole had told her that she herself was

a swindler. As the best way of convincing the ladies, she bethought her

of begging them to see the wife; and, as Miss Pole said, there was no

doubting the honest, worn, bronzed face of the woman, who at the first

tender word from Lady Glenmire, burst into tears, which she was too weak

to check until some word from the landlady made her swallow down her

sobs, in order that she might testify to the Christian kindness shown by

Mr and Mrs Roberts. Miss Pole came round with a swing to as vehement a

belief in the sorrowful tale as she had been sceptical before; and, as

a proof of this, her energy in the poor sufferer’s behalf was nothing

daunted when she found out that he, and no other, was our Signor

Brunoni, to whom all Cranford had been attributing all manner of evil

this six weeks past! Yes! his wife said his proper name was Samuel

Brown—“Sam,” she called him—but to the last we preferred calling him

“the Signor”; it sounded so much better.

The end of their conversation with the Signora Brunoni was that it was

agreed that he should be placed under medical advice, and for any

expense incurred in procuring this Lady Glenmire promised to hold

herself responsible, and had accordingly gone to Mr Hoggins to beg him

to ride over to the “Rising Sun” that very afternoon, and examine into

the signor’s real state; and, as Miss Pole said, if it was desirable to

remove him to Cranford to be more immediately under Mr Hoggins’s eye,

she would undertake to see for lodgings and arrange about the rent. Mrs

Roberts had been as kind as could be all throughout, but it was evident

that their long residence there had been a slight inconvenience.

Before Miss Pole left us, Miss Matty and I were as full of the morning’s

adventure as she was. We talked about it all the evening, turning it in

every possible light, and we went to bed anxious for the morning, when

we should surely hear from someone what Mr Hoggins thought and

recommended; for, as Miss Matty observed, though Mr Hoggins did say

“Jack’s up,” “a fig for his heels,” and called Preference “Pref.” she

believed he was a very worthy man and a very clever surgeon. Indeed, we

were rather proud of our doctor at Cranford, as a doctor. We often

wished, when we heard of Queen Adelaide or the Duke of Wellington being

ill, that they would send for Mr Hoggins; but, on consideration, we were

rather glad they did not, for, if we were ailing, what should we do if

Mr Hoggins had been appointed physician-in-ordinary to the Royal Family?

As a surgeon we were proud of him; but as a man—or rather, I should

say, as a gentleman—we could only shake our heads over his name and

himself, and wished that he had read Lord Chesterfield’s Letters in the

days when his manners were susceptible of improvement. Nevertheless, we

all regarded his dictum in the signor’s case as infallible, and when he

said that with care and attention he might rally, we had no more fear

for him.

But, although we had no more fear, everybody did as much as if there was

great cause for anxiety—as indeed there was until Mr Hoggins took charge

of him. Miss Pole looked out clean and comfortable, if homely,

lodgings; Miss Matty sent the sedan-chair for him, and Martha and I

aired it well before it left Cranford by holding a warming-pan full of

red-hot coals in it, and then shutting it up close, smoke and all, until

the time when he should get into it at the “Rising Sun.” Lady Glenmire

undertook the medical department under Mr Hoggins’s directions, and

rummaged up all Mrs Jamieson’s medicine glasses, and spoons, and

bed-tables, in a free-and-easy way, that made Miss Matty feel a little

anxious as to what that lady and Mr Mulliner might say, if they knew.

Mrs Forrester made some of the bread-jelly, for which she was so famous,

to have ready as a refreshment in the lodgings when he should arrive. A

present of this bread-jelly was the highest mark of favour dear Mrs

Forrester could confer. Miss Pole had once asked her for the receipt,

but she had met with a very decided rebuff; that lady told her that she

could not part with it to any one during her life, and that after her

death it was bequeathed, as her executors would find, to Miss Matty.

What Miss Matty, or, as Mrs Forrester called her (remembering the clause

in her will and the dignity of the occasion), Miss Matilda Jenkyns—might

choose to do with the receipt when it came into her possession—whether

to make it public, or to hand it down as an heirloom—she did not know,

nor would she dictate. And a mould of this admirable, digestible,

unique bread-jelly was sent by Mrs Forrester to our poor sick conjuror.

Who says that the aristocracy are proud? Here was a lady by birth a

Tyrrell, and descended from the great Sir Walter that shot King Rufus,

and in whose veins ran the blood of him who murdered the little princes

in the Tower, going every day to see what dainty dishes she could

prepare for Samuel Brown, a mountebank! But, indeed, it was wonderful

to see what kind feelings were called out by this poor man’s coming

amongst us. And also wonderful to see how the great Cranford panic,

which had been occasioned by his first coming in his Turkish dress,

melted away into thin air on his second coming—pale and feeble, and with

his heavy, filmy eyes, that only brightened a very little when they fell

upon the countenance of his faithful wife, or their pale and sorrowful

little girl.

Somehow we all forgot to be afraid. I daresay it was that finding out

that he, who had first excited our love of the marvellous by his

unprecedented arts, had not sufficient every-day gifts to manage a

shying horse, made us feel as if we were ourselves again. Miss Pole

came with her little basket at all hours of the evening, as if her

lonely house and the unfrequented road to it had never been infested by

that “murderous gang”; Mrs Forrester said she thought that neither Jenny

nor she need mind the headless lady who wept and wailed in Darkness

Lane, for surely the power was never given to such beings to harm those

who went about to try to do what little good was in their power, to

which Jenny tremblingly assented; but the mistress’s theory had little

effect on the maid’s practice until she had sewn two pieces of red

flannel in the shape of a cross on her inner garment.

I found Miss Matty covering her penny ball—the ball that she used to

roll under her bed—with gay-coloured worsted in rainbow stripes.

“My dear,” said she, “my heart is sad for that little careworn child.

Although her father is a conjuror, she looks as if she had never had a

good game of play in her life. I used to make very pretty balls in this

way when I was a girl, and I thought I would try if I could not make

this one smart and take it to Phoebe this afternoon. I think ‘the gang’

must have left the neighbourhood, for one does not hear any more of

their violence and robbery now.”

We were all of us far too full of the signor’s precarious state to talk

either about robbers or ghosts. Indeed, Lady Glenmire said she never

had heard of any actual robberies, except that two little boys had

stolen some apples from Farmer Benson’s orchard, and that some eggs had

been missed on a market-day off Widow Hayward’s stall. But that was

expecting too much of us; we could not acknowledge that we had only had

this small foundation for all our panic. Miss Pole drew herself up at

this remark of Lady Glenmire’s, and said “that she wished she could

agree with her as to the very small reason we had had for alarm, but

with the recollection of a man disguised as a woman who had endeavoured

to force himself into her house while his confederates waited outside;

with the knowledge gained from Lady Glenmire herself, of the footprints

seen on Mrs Jamieson’s flower borders; with the fact before her of the

audacious robbery committed on Mr Hoggins at his own door”—But here Lady

Glenmire broke in with a very strong expression of doubt as to whether

this last story was not an entire fabrication founded upon the theft of

a cat; she grew so red while she was saying all this that I was not

surprised at Miss Pole’s manner of bridling up, and I am certain, if

Lady Glenmire had not been “her ladyship,” we should have had a more

emphatic contradiction than the “Well, to be sure!” and similar

fragmentary ejaculations, which were all that she ventured upon in my

lady’s presence. But when she was gone Miss Pole began a long

congratulation to Miss Matty that so far they had escaped marriage,

which she noticed always made people credulous to the last degree;

indeed, she thought it argued great natural credulity in a woman if she

could not keep herself from being married; and in what Lady Glenmire had

said about Mr Hoggins’s robbery we had a specimen of what people came to

if they gave way to such a weakness; evidently Lady Glenmire would

swallow anything if she could believe the poor vamped-up story about a

neck of mutton and a pussy with which he had tried to impose on Miss

Pole, only she had always been on her guard against believing too much

of what men said.

We were thankful, as Miss Pole desired us to be, that we had never been

married; but I think, of the two, we were even more thankful that the

robbers had left Cranford; at least I judge so from a speech of Miss

Matty’s that evening, as we sat over the fire, in which she evidently

looked upon a husband as a great protector against thieves, burglars,

and ghosts; and said that she did not think that she should dare to be

always warning young people against matrimony, as Miss Pole did

continually; to be sure, marriage was a risk, as she saw, now she had

had some experience; but she remembered the time when she had looked

forward to being married as much as any one.

“Not to any particular person, my dear,” said she, hastily checking

herself up, as if she were afraid of having admitted too much; “only the

old story, you know, of ladies always saying, ‘\_When\_ I marry,’ and

gentlemen, ‘\_If\_ I marry.’” It was a joke spoken in rather a sad tone,

and I doubt if either of us smiled; but I could not see Miss Matty’s

face by the flickering fire-light. In a little while she continued—

“But, after all, I have not told you the truth. It is so long ago, and

no one ever knew how much I thought of it at the time, unless, indeed,

my dear mother guessed; but I may say that there was a time when I did

not think I should have been only Miss Matty Jenkyns all my life; for

even if I did meet with any one who wished to marry me now (and, as Miss

Pole says, one is never too safe), I could not take him—I hope he would

not take it too much to heart, but I could \_not\_ take him—or any one but

the person I once thought I should be married to; and he is dead and

gone, and he never knew how it all came about that I said ‘No,’ when I

had thought many and many a time—Well, it’s no matter what I thought.

God ordains it all, and I am very happy, my dear. No one has such kind

friends as I,” continued she, taking my hand and holding it in hers.

If I had never known of Mr Holbrook, I could have said something in this

pause, but as I had, I could not think of anything that would come in

naturally, and so we both kept silence for a little time.

“My father once made us,” she began, “keep a diary, in two columns; on

one side we were to put down in the morning what we thought would be the

course and events of the coming day, and at night we were to put down on

the other side what really had happened. It would be to some people

rather a sad way of telling their lives,” (a tear dropped upon my hand

at these words)—“I don’t mean that mine has been sad, only so very

different to what I expected. I remember, one winter’s evening, sitting

over our bedroom fire with Deborah—I remember it as if it were

yesterday—and we were planning our future lives, both of us were

planning, though only she talked about it. She said she should like to

marry an archdeacon, and write his charges; and you know, my dear, she

never was married, and, for aught I know, she never spoke to an

unmarried archdeacon in her life. I never was ambitious, nor could I

have written charges, but I thought I could manage a house (my mother

used to call me her right hand), and I was always so fond of little

children—the shyest babies would stretch out their little arms to come

to me; when I was a girl, I was half my leisure time nursing in the

neighbouring cottages; but I don’t know how it was, when I grew sad and

grave—which I did a year or two after this time—the little things drew

back from me, and I am afraid I lost the knack, though I am just as fond

of children as ever, and have a strange yearning at my heart whenever I

see a mother with her baby in her arms. Nay, my dear” (and by a sudden

blaze which sprang up from a fall of the unstirred coals, I saw that her

eyes were full of tears—gazing intently on some vision of what might

have been), “do you know I dream sometimes that I have a little

child—always the same—a little girl of about two years old; she never

grows older, though I have dreamt about her for many years. I don’t

think I ever dream of any words or sound she makes; she is very

noiseless and still, but she comes to me when she is very sorry or very

glad, and I have wakened with the clasp of her dear little arms round my

neck. Only last night—perhaps because I had gone to sleep thinking of

this ball for Phoebe—my little darling came in my dream, and put up her

mouth to be kissed, just as I have seen real babies do to real mothers

before going to bed. But all this is nonsense, dear! only don’t be

frightened by Miss Pole from being married. I can fancy it may be a

very happy state, and a little credulity helps one on through life very

smoothly—better than always doubting and doubting and seeing

difficulties and disagreeables in everything.”

[Picture: Would stretch out their little arms]

If I had been inclined to be daunted from matrimony, it would not have

been Miss Pole to do it; it would have been the lot of poor Signor

Brunoni and his wife. And yet again, it was an encouragement to see

how, through all their cares and sorrows, they thought of each other and

not of themselves; and how keen were their joys, if they only passed

through each other, or through the little Phoebe.

The signora told me, one day, a good deal about their lives up to this

period. It began by my asking her whether Miss Pole’s story of the

twin-brothers were true; it sounded so wonderful a likeness, that I

should have had my doubts, if Miss Pole had not been unmarried. But the

signora, or (as we found out she preferred to be called) Mrs Brown, said

it was quite true; that her brother-in-law was by many taken for her

husband, which was of great assistance to them in their profession;

“though,” she continued, “how people can mistake Thomas for the real

Signor Brunoni, I can’t conceive; but he says they do; so I suppose I

must believe him. Not but what he is a very good man; I am sure I don’t

know how we should have paid our bill at the ‘Rising Sun’ but for the

money he sends; but people must know very little about art if they can

take him for my husband. Why, Miss, in the ball trick, where my husband

spreads his fingers wide, and throws out his little finger with quite an

air and a grace, Thomas just clumps up his hand like a fist, and might

have ever so many balls hidden in it. Besides, he has never been in

India, and knows nothing of the proper sit of a turban.”

“Have you been in India?” said I, rather astonished.

“Oh, yes! many a year, ma’am. Sam was a sergeant in the 31st; and when

the regiment was ordered to India, I drew a lot to go, and I was more

thankful than I can tell; for it seemed as if it would only be a slow

death to me to part from my husband. But, indeed, ma’am, if I had known

all, I don’t know whether I would not rather have died there and then

than gone through what I have done since. To be sure, I’ve been able to

comfort Sam, and to be with him; but, ma’am, I’ve lost six children,”

said she, looking up at me with those strange eyes that I’ve never

noticed but in mothers of dead children—with a kind of wild look in

them, as if seeking for what they never more might find. “Yes! Six

children died off, like little buds nipped untimely, in that cruel

India. I thought, as each died, I never could—I never would—love a

child again; and when the next came, it had not only its own love, but

the deeper love that came from the thoughts of its little dead brothers

and sisters. And when Phoebe was coming, I said to my husband, ‘Sam,

when the child is born, and I am strong, I shall leave you; it will cut

my heart cruel; but if this baby dies too, I shall go mad; the madness

is in me now; but if you let me go down to Calcutta, carrying my baby

step by step, it will, maybe, work itself off; and I will save, and I

will hoard, and I will beg—and I will die, to get a passage home to

England, where our baby may live?’ God bless him! he said I might go;

and he saved up his pay, and I saved every pice I could get for washing

or any way; and when Phoebe came, and I grew strong again, I set off.

It was very lonely; through the thick forests, dark again with their

heavy trees—along by the river’s side (but I had been brought up near

the Avon in Warwickshire, so that flowing noise sounded like home)—from

station to station, from Indian village to village, I went along,

carrying my child. I had seen one of the officer’s ladies with a little

picture, ma’am—done by a Catholic foreigner, ma’am—of the Virgin and the

little Saviour, ma’am. She had him on her arm, and her form was softly

curled round him, and their cheeks touched. Well, when I went to bid

good-bye to this lady, for whom I had washed, she cried sadly; for she,

too, had lost her children, but she had not another to save, like me;

and I was bold enough to ask her would she give me that print. And she

cried the more, and said her children were with that little blessed

Jesus; and gave it me, and told me that she had heard it had been

painted on the bottom of a cask, which made it have that round shape.

And when my body was very weary, and my heart was sick (for there were

times when I misdoubted if I could ever reach my home, and there were

times when I thought of my husband, and one time when I thought my baby

was dying), I took out that picture and looked at it, till I could have

thought the mother spoke to me, and comforted me. And the natives were

very kind. We could not understand one another; but they saw my baby on

my breast, and they came out to me, and brought me rice and milk, and

sometimes flowers—I have got some of the flowers dried. Then, the next

morning, I was so tired; and they wanted me to stay with them—I could

tell that—and tried to frighten me from going into the deep woods,

which, indeed, looked very strange and dark; but it seemed to me as if

Death was following me to take my baby away from me; and as if I must go

on, and on—and I thought how God had cared for mothers ever since the

world was made, and would care for me; so I bade them good-bye, and set

off afresh. And once when my baby was ill, and both she and I needed

rest, He led me to a place where I found a kind Englishman lived, right

in the midst of the natives.”

“And you reached Calcutta safely at last?”

“Yes, safely! Oh! when I knew I had only two days’ journey more before

me, I could not help it, ma’am—it might be idolatry, I cannot tell—but I

was near one of the native temples, and I went into it with my baby to

thank God for His great mercy; for it seemed to me that where others had

prayed before to their God, in their joy or in their agony, was of

itself a sacred place. And I got as servant to an invalid lady, who

grew quite fond of my baby aboard-ship; and, in two years’ time, Sam

earned his discharge, and came home to me, and to our child. Then he

had to fix on a trade; but he knew of none; and once, once upon a time,

he had learnt some tricks from an Indian juggler; so he set up

conjuring, and it answered so well that he took Thomas to help him—as

his man, you know, not as another conjuror, though Thomas has set it up

now on his own hook. But it has been a great help to us that likeness

between the twins, and made a good many tricks go off well that they

made up together. And Thomas is a good brother, only he has not the

fine carriage of my husband, so that I can’t think how he can be taken

for Signor Brunoni himself, as he says he is.”

“Poor little Phoebe!” said I, my thoughts going back to the baby she

carried all those hundred miles.

“Ah! you may say so! I never thought I should have reared her, though,

when she fell ill at Chunderabaddad; but that good, kind Aga Jenkyns

took us in, which I believe was the very saving of her.”

“Jenkyns!” said I.

“Yes, Jenkyns. I shall think all people of that name are kind; for here

is that nice old lady who comes every day to take Phoebe a walk!”

But an idea had flashed through my head; could the Aga Jenkyns be the

lost Peter? True he was reported by many to be dead. But, equally

true, some had said that he had arrived at the dignity of Great Lama of

Thibet. Miss Matty thought he was alive. I would make further inquiry.

CHAPTER XII.

ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED

WAS the “poor Peter” of Cranford the Aga Jenkyns of Chunderabaddad, or

was he not? As somebody says, that was the question.

In my own home, whenever people had nothing else to do, they blamed me

for want of discretion. Indiscretion was my bug-bear fault. Everybody

has a bug-bear fault, a sort of standing characteristic—a \_pièce de

résistance\_ for their friends to cut at; and in general they cut and

come again. I was tired of being called indiscreet and incautious; and

I determined for once to prove myself a model of prudence and wisdom. I

would not even hint my suspicions respecting the Aga. I would collect

evidence and carry it home to lay before my father, as the family friend

of the two Miss Jenkynses.

In my search after facts, I was often reminded of a description my

father had once given of a ladies’ committee that he had had to preside

over. He said he could not help thinking of a passage in Dickens, which

spoke of a chorus in which every man took the tune he knew best, and

sang it to his own satisfaction. So, at this charitable committee,

every lady took the subject uppermost in her mind, and talked about it

to her own great contentment, but not much to the advancement of the

subject they had met to discuss. But even that committee could have

been nothing to the Cranford ladies when I attempted to gain some clear

and definite information as to poor Peter’s height, appearance, and when

and where he was seen and heard of last. For instance, I remember

asking Miss Pole (and I thought the question was very opportune, for I

put it when I met her at a call at Mrs Forrester’s, and both the ladies

had known Peter, and I imagined that they might refresh each other’s

memories)—I asked Miss Pole what was the very last thing they had ever

heard about him; and then she named the absurd report to which I have

alluded, about his having been elected Great Lama of Thibet; and this

was a signal for each lady to go off on her separate idea. Mrs

Forrester’s start was made on the veiled prophet in Lalla Rookh—whether

I thought he was meant for the Great Lama, though Peter was not so ugly,

indeed rather handsome, if he had not been freckled. I was thankful to

see her double upon Peter; but, in a moment, the delusive lady was off

upon Rowland’s Kalydor, and the merits of cosmetics and hair oils in

general, and holding forth so fluently that I turned to listen to Miss

Pole, who (through the llamas, the beasts of burden) had got to Peruvian

bonds, and the share market, and her poor opinion of joint-stock banks

in general, and of that one in particular in which Miss Matty’s money

was invested. In vain I put in “When was it—in what year was it that

you heard that Mr Peter was the Great Lama?” They only joined issue to

dispute whether llamas were carnivorous animals or not; in which dispute

they were not quite on fair grounds, as Mrs Forrester (after they had

grown warm and cool again) acknowledged that she always confused

carnivorous and graminivorous together, just as she did horizontal and

perpendicular; but then she apologised for it very prettily, by saying

that in her day the only use people made of four-syllabled words was to

teach how they should be spelt.

The only fact I gained from this conversation was that certainly Peter

had last been heard of in India, “or that neighbourhood”; and that this

scanty intelligence of his whereabouts had reached Cranford in the year

when Miss Pole had brought her Indian muslin gown, long since worn out

(we washed it and mended it, and traced its decline and fall into a

window-blind before we could go on); and in a year when Wombwell came to

Cranford, because Miss Matty had wanted to see an elephant in order that

she might the better imagine Peter riding on one; and had seen a

boa-constrictor too, which was more than she wished to imagine in her

fancy-pictures of Peter’s locality; and in a year when Miss Jenkyns had

learnt some piece of poetry off by heart, and used to say, at all the

Cranford parties, how Peter was “surveying mankind from China to Peru,”

which everybody had thought very grand, and rather appropriate, because

India was between China and Peru, if you took care to turn the globe to

the left instead of the right.

I suppose all these inquiries of mine, and the consequent curiosity

excited in the minds of my friends, made us blind and deaf to what was

going on around us. It seemed to me as if the sun rose and shone, and

as if the rain rained on Cranford, just as usual, and I did not notice

any sign of the times that could be considered as a prognostic of any

uncommon event; and, to the best of my belief, not only Miss Matty and

Mrs Forrester, but even Miss Pole herself, whom we looked upon as a kind

of prophetess, from the knack she had of foreseeing things before they

came to pass—although she did not like to disturb her friends by telling

them her foreknowledge—even Miss Pole herself was breathless with

astonishment when she came to tell us of the astounding piece of news.

But I must recover myself; the contemplation of it, even at this

distance of time, has taken away my breath and my grammar, and unless I

subdue my emotion, my spelling will go too.

We were sitting—Miss Matty and I—much as usual, she in the blue chintz

easy-chair, with her back to the light, and her knitting in her hand, I

reading aloud the \_St James’s Chronicle\_. A few minutes more, and we

should have gone to make the little alterations in dress usual before

calling-time (twelve o’clock) in Cranford. I remember the scene and the

date well. We had been talking of the signor’s rapid recovery since

the warmer weather had set in, and praising Mr Hoggins’s skill, and

lamenting his want of refinement and manner (it seems a curious

coincidence that this should have been our subject, but so it was), when

a knock was heard—a caller’s knock—three distinct taps—and we were

flying (that is to say, Miss Matty could not walk very fast, having had

a touch of rheumatism) to our rooms, to change cap and collars, when

Miss Pole arrested us by calling out, as she came up the stairs, “Don’t

go—I can’t wait—it is not twelve, I know—but never mind your dress—I

must speak to you.” We did our best to look as if it was not we who had

made the hurried movement, the sound of which she had heard; for, of

course, we did not like to have it supposed that we had any old clothes

that it was convenient to wear out in the “sanctuary of home,” as Miss

Jenkyns once prettily called the back parlour, where she was tying up

preserves. So we threw our gentility with double force into our

manners, and very genteel we were for two minutes while Miss Pole

recovered breath, and excited our curiosity strongly by lifting up her

hands in amazement, and bringing them down in silence, as if what she

had to say was too big for words, and could only be expressed by

pantomime.

“What do you think, Miss Matty? What \_do\_ you think? Lady Glenmire is

to marry—is to be married, I mean—Lady Glenmire—Mr Hoggins—Mr Hoggins is

going to marry Lady Glenmire!”

“Marry!” said we. “Marry! Madness!”

[Picture: What do you think, Miss Matty]

“Marry!” said Miss Pole, with the decision that belonged to her

character. “\_I\_ said marry! as you do; and I also said, ‘What a fool my

lady is going to make of herself!’ I could have said ‘Madness!’ but I

controlled myself, for it was in a public shop that I heard of it.

Where feminine delicacy is gone to, I don’t know! You and I, Miss

Matty, would have been ashamed to have known that our marriage was

spoken of in a grocer’s shop, in the hearing of shopmen!”

“But,” said Miss Matty, sighing as one recovering from a blow, “perhaps

it is not true. Perhaps we are doing her injustice.”

“No,” said Miss Pole. “I have taken care to ascertain that. I went

straight to Mrs Fitz-Adam, to borrow a cookery-book which I knew she

had; and I introduced my congratulations \_à propos\_ of the difficulty

gentlemen must have in house-keeping; and Mrs Fitz-Adam bridled up, and

said that she believed it was true, though how and where I could have

heard it she did not know. She said her brother and Lady Glenmire had

come to an understanding at last. ‘Understanding!’ such a coarse word!

But my lady will have to come down to many a want of refinement. I have

reason to believe Mr Hoggins sups on bread-and-cheese and beer every

night.

“Marry!” said Miss Matty once again. “Well! I never thought of it.

Two people that we know going to be married. It’s coming very near!”

“So near that my heart stopped beating when I heard of it, while you

might have counted twelve,” said Miss Pole.

“One does not know whose turn may come next. Here, in Cranford, poor

Lady Glenmire might have thought herself safe,” said Miss Matty, with a

gentle pity in her tones.

“Bah!” said Miss Pole, with a toss of her head. “Don’t you remember

poor dear Captain Brown’s song ‘Tibbie Fowler,’ and the line—

‘Set her on the Tintock tap,

The wind will blaw a man till her.’”

“That was because ‘Tibbie Fowler’ was rich, I think.”

“Well! there was a kind of attraction about Lady Glenmire that I, for

one, should be ashamed to have.”

I put in my wonder. “But how can she have fancied Mr Hoggins? I am not

surprised that Mr Hoggins has liked her.”

“Oh! I don’t know. Mr Hoggins is rich, and very pleasant-looking,”

said Miss Matty, “and very good-tempered and kind-hearted.”

“She has married for an establishment, that’s it. I suppose she takes

the surgery with it,” said Miss Pole, with a little dry laugh at her own

joke. But, like many people who think they have made a severe and

sarcastic speech, which yet is clever of its kind, she began to relax in

her grimness from the moment when she made this allusion to the surgery;

and we turned to speculate on the way in which Mrs Jamieson would

receive the news. The person whom she had left in charge of her house

to keep off followers from her maids to set up a follower of her own!

And that follower a man whom Mrs Jamieson had tabooed as vulgar, and

inadmissible to Cranford society, not merely on account of his name, but

because of his voice, his complexion, his boots, smelling of the stable,

and himself, smelling of drugs. Had he ever been to see Lady Glenmire

at Mrs Jamieson’s? Chloride of lime would not purify the house in its

owner’s estimation if he had. Or had their interviews been confined to

the occasional meetings in the chamber of the poor sick conjuror, to

whom, with all our sense of the \_mésalliance\_, we could not help

allowing that they had both been exceedingly kind? And now it turned

out that a servant of Mrs Jamieson’s had been ill, and Mr Hoggins had

been attending her for some weeks. So the wolf had got into the fold,

and now he was carrying off the shepherdess. What would Mrs Jamieson

say? We looked into the darkness of futurity as a child gazes after a

rocket up in the cloudy sky, full of wondering expectation of the

rattle, the discharge, and the brilliant shower of sparks and light.

Then we brought ourselves down to earth and the present time by

questioning each other (being all equally ignorant, and all equally

without the slightest data to build any conclusions upon) as to when IT

would take place? Where? How much a year Mr Hoggins had? Whether she

would drop her title? And how Martha and the other correct servants in

Cranford would ever be brought to announce a married couple as Lady

Glenmire and Mr Hoggins? But would they be visited? Would Mrs Jamieson

let us? Or must we choose between the Honourable Mrs Jamieson and the

degraded Lady Glenmire? We all liked Lady Glenmire the best. She was

bright, and kind, and sociable, and agreeable; and Mrs Jamieson was

dull, and inert, and pompous, and tiresome. But we had acknowledged the

sway of the latter so long, that it seemed like a kind of disloyalty now

even to meditate disobedience to the prohibition we anticipated.

Mrs Forrester surprised us in our darned caps and patched collars; and

we forgot all about them in our eagerness to see how she would bear the

information, which we honourably left to Miss Pole, to impart, although,

if we had been inclined to take unfair advantage, we might have rushed

in ourselves, for she had a most out-of-place fit of coughing for five

minutes after Mrs Forrester entered the room. I shall never forget the

imploring expression of her eyes, as she looked at us over her

pocket-handkerchief. They said, as plain as words could speak, “Don’t

let Nature deprive me of the treasure which is mine, although for a time

I can make no use of it.” And we did not.

Mrs Forrester’s surprise was equal to ours; and her sense of injury

rather greater, because she had to feel for her Order, and saw more

fully than we could do how such conduct brought stains on the

aristocracy.

When she and Miss Pole left us we endeavoured to subside into calmness;

but Miss Matty was really upset by the intelligence she had heard. She

reckoned it up, and it was more than fifteen years since she had heard

of any of her acquaintance going to be married, with the one exception

of Miss Jessie Brown; and, as she said, it gave her quite a shock, and

made her feel as if she could not think what would happen next.

I don’t know whether it is a fancy of mine, or a real fact, but I have

noticed that, just after the announcement of an engagement in any set,

the unmarried ladies in that set flutter out in an unusual gaiety and

newness of dress, as much as to say, in a tacit and unconscious manner,

“We also are spinsters.” Miss Matty and Miss Pole talked and thought

more about bonnets, gowns, caps, and shawls, during the fortnight that

succeeded this call, than I had known them do for years before. But it

might be the spring weather, for it was a warm and pleasant March; and

merinoes and beavers, and woollen materials of all sorts were but

ungracious receptacles of the bright sun’s glancing rays. It had not

been Lady Glenmire’s dress that had won Mr Hoggins’s heart, for she went

about on her errands of kindness more shabby than ever. Although in the

hurried glimpses I caught of her at church or elsewhere she appeared

rather to shun meeting any of her friends, her face seemed to have

almost something of the flush of youth in it; her lips looked redder and

more trembling full than in their old compressed state, and her eyes

dwelt on all things with a lingering light, as if she was learning to

love Cranford and its belongings. Mr Hoggins looked broad and radiant,

and creaked up the middle aisle at church in a brand-new pair of

top-boots—an audible, as well as visible, sign of his purposed change of

state; for the tradition went, that the boots he had worn till now were

the identical pair in which he first set out on his rounds in Cranford

twenty-five years ago; only they had been new-pieced, high and low, top

and bottom, heel and sole, black leather and brown leather, more times

than any one could tell.

None of the ladies in Cranford chose to sanction the marriage by

congratulating either of the parties. We wished to ignore the whole

affair until our liege lady, Mrs Jamieson, returned. Till she came back

to give us our cue, we felt that it would be better to consider the

engagement in the same light as the Queen of Spain’s legs—facts which

certainly existed, but the less said about the better. This restraint

upon our tongues—for you see if we did not speak about it to any of the

parties concerned, how could we get answers to the questions that we

longed to ask?—was beginning to be irksome, and our idea of the dignity

of silence was paling before our curiosity, when another direction was

given to our thoughts, by an announcement on the part of the principal

shopkeeper of Cranford, who ranged the trades from grocer and

cheesemonger to man-milliner, as occasion required, that the spring

fashions were arrived, and would be exhibited on the following Tuesday

at his rooms in High Street. Now Miss Matty had been only waiting for

this before buying herself a new silk gown. I had offered, it is true,

to send to Drumble for patterns, but she had rejected my proposal,

gently implying that she had not forgotten her disappointment about the

sea-green turban. I was thankful that I was on the spot now, to

counteract the dazzling fascination of any yellow or scarlet silk.

I must say a word or two here about myself. I have spoken of my

father’s old friendship for the Jenkyns family; indeed, I am not sure if

there was not some distant relationship. He had willingly allowed me to

remain all the winter at Cranford, in consideration of a letter which

Miss Matty had written to him about the time of the panic, in which I

suspect she had exaggerated my powers and my bravery as a defender of

the house. But now that the days were longer and more cheerful, he was

beginning to urge the necessity of my return; and I only delayed in a

sort of odd forlorn hope that if I could obtain any clear information, I

might make the account given by the signora of the Aga Jenkyns tally

with that of “poor Peter,” his appearance and disappearance, which I had

winnowed out of the conversation of Miss Pole and Mrs Forrester.

CHAPTER XIII.

STOPPED PAYMENT

THE very Tuesday morning on which Mr Johnson was going to show the

fashions, the post-woman brought two letters to the house. I say the

post-woman, but I should say the postman’s wife. He was a lame

shoemaker, a very clean, honest man, much respected in the town; but he

never brought the letters round except on unusual occasions, such as

Christmas Day or Good Friday; and on those days the letters, which

should have been delivered at eight in the morning, did not make their

appearance until two or three in the afternoon, for every one liked poor

Thomas, and gave him a welcome on these festive occasions. He used to

say, “He was welly stawed wi’ eating, for there were three or four

houses where nowt would serve ’em but he must share in their breakfast;”

and by the time he had done his last breakfast, he came to some other

friend who was beginning dinner; but come what might in the way of

temptation, Tom was always sober, civil, and smiling; and, as Miss

Jenkyns used to say, it was a lesson in patience, that she doubted not

would call out that precious quality in some minds, where, but for

Thomas, it might have lain dormant and undiscovered. Patience was

certainly very dormant in Miss Jenkyns’s mind. She was always expecting

letters, and always drumming on the table till the post-woman had called

or gone past. On Christmas Day and Good Friday she drummed from

breakfast till church, from church-time till two o’clock—unless when the

fire wanted stirring, when she invariably knocked down the fire-irons,

and scolded Miss Matty for it. But equally certain was the hearty

welcome and the good dinner for Thomas; Miss Jenkyns standing over him

like a bold dragoon, questioning him as to his children—what they were

doing—what school they went to; upbraiding him if another was likely to

make its appearance, but sending even the little babies the shilling and

the mince-pie which was her gift to all the children, with half-a-crown

in addition for both father and mother. The post was not half of so

much consequence to dear Miss Matty; but not for the world would she

have diminished Thomas’s welcome and his dole, though I could see that

she felt rather shy over the ceremony, which had been regarded by Miss

Jenkyns as a glorious opportunity for giving advice and benefiting her

fellow-creatures. Miss Matty would steal the money all in a lump into

his hand, as if she were ashamed of herself. Miss Jenkyns gave him each

individual coin separate, with a “There! that’s for yourself; that’s for

Jenny,” etc. Miss Matty would even beckon Martha out of the kitchen

while he ate his food: and once, to my knowledge, winked at its rapid

disappearance into a blue cotton pocket-handkerchief. Miss Jenkyns

almost scolded him if he did not leave a clean plate, however heaped it

might have been, and gave an injunction with every mouthful.

[Picture: Standing over him like a bold dragoon]

I have wandered a long way from the two letters that awaited us on the

breakfast-table that Tuesday morning. Mine was from my father. Miss

Matty’s was printed. My father’s was just a man’s letter; I mean it was

very dull, and gave no information beyond that he was well, that they

had had a good deal of rain, that trade was very stagnant, and there

were many disagreeable rumours afloat. He then asked me if I knew

whether Miss Matty still retained her shares in the Town and County

Bank, as there were very unpleasant reports about it; though nothing

more than he had always foreseen, and had prophesied to Miss Jenkyns

years ago, when she would invest their little property in it—the only

unwise step that clever woman had ever taken, to his knowledge (the only

time she ever acted against his advice, I knew). However, if anything

had gone wrong, of course I was not to think of leaving Miss Matty while

I could be of any use, etc.

“Who is your letter from, my dear? Mine is a very civil invitation,

signed ‘Edwin Wilson,’ asking me to attend an important meeting of the

shareholders of the Town and County Bank, to be held in Drumble, on

Thursday the twenty-first. I am sure, it is very attentive of them to

remember me.”

I did not like to hear of this “important meeting,” for, though I did

not know much about business, I feared it confirmed what my father said:

however, I thought, ill news always came fast enough, so I resolved to

say nothing about my alarm, and merely told her that my father was well,

and sent his kind regards to her. She kept turning over and admiring

her letter. At last she spoke—

“I remember their sending one to Deborah just like this; but that I did

not wonder at, for everybody knew she was so clear-headed. I am afraid

I could not help them much; indeed, if they came to accounts, I should

be quite in the way, for I never could do sums in my head. Deborah, I

know, rather wished to go, and went so far as to order a new bonnet for

the occasion: but when the time came she had a bad cold; so they sent

her a very polite account of what they had done. Chosen a director, I

think it was. Do you think they want me to help them to choose a

director? I am sure I should choose your father at once!”

“My father has no shares in the bank,” said I.

“Oh, no! I remember. He objected very much to Deborah’s buying any, I

believe. But she was quite the woman of business, and always judged for

herself; and here, you see, they have paid eight per cent. all these

years.”

It was a very uncomfortable subject to me, with my half-knowledge; so I

thought I would change the conversation, and I asked at what time she

thought we had better go and see the fashions. “Well, my dear,” she

said, “the thing is this: it is not etiquette to go till after twelve;

but then, you see, all Cranford will be there, and one does not like to

be too curious about dress and trimmings and caps with all the world

looking on. It is never genteel to be over-curious on these occasions.

Deborah had the knack of always looking as if the latest fashion was

nothing new to her; a manner she had caught from Lady Arley, who did see

all the new modes in London, you know. So I thought we would just slip

down—for I do want this morning, soon after breakfast half-a-pound of

tea—and then we could go up and examine the things at our leisure, and

see exactly how my new silk gown must be made; and then, after twelve,

we could go with our minds disengaged, and free from thoughts of dress.”

We began to talk of Miss Matty’s new silk gown. I discovered that it

would be really the first time in her life that she had had to choose

anything of consequence for herself: for Miss Jenkyns had always been

the more decided character, whatever her taste might have been; and it

is astonishing how such people carry the world before them by the mere

force of will. Miss Matty anticipated the sight of the glossy folds

with as much delight as if the five sovereigns, set apart for the

purchase, could buy all the silks in the shop; and (remembering my own

loss of two hours in a toyshop before I could tell on what wonder to

spend a silver threepence) I was very glad that we were going early,

that dear Miss Matty might have leisure for the delights of perplexity.

If a happy sea-green could be met with, the gown was to be sea-green: if

not, she inclined to maize, and I to silver gray; and we discussed the

requisite number of breadths until we arrived at the shop-door. We were

to buy the tea, select the silk, and then clamber up the iron corkscrew

stairs that led into what was once a loft, though now a fashion

show-room.

The young men at Mr Johnson’s had on their best looks; and their best

cravats, and pivoted themselves over the counter with surprising

activity. They wanted to show us upstairs at once; but on the principle

of business first and pleasure afterwards, we stayed to purchase the

tea. Here Miss Matty’s absence of mind betrayed itself. If she was

made aware that she had been drinking green tea at any time, she always

thought it her duty to lie awake half through the night afterward (I

have known her take it in ignorance many a time without such effects),

and consequently green tea was prohibited the house; yet to-day she

herself asked for the obnoxious article, under the impression that she

was talking about the silk. However, the mistake was soon rectified;

and then the silks were unrolled in good truth. By this time the shop

was pretty well filled, for it was Cranford market-day, and many of the

farmers and country people from the neighbourhood round came in,

sleeking down their hair, and glancing shyly about, from under their

eyelids, as anxious to take back some notion of the unusual gaiety to

the mistress or the lasses at home, and yet feeling that they were out

of place among the smart shopmen and gay shawls and summer prints. One

honest-looking man, however, made his way up to the counter at which we

stood, and boldly asked to look at a shawl or two. The other country

folk confined themselves to the grocery side; but our neighbour was

evidently too full of some kind intention towards mistress, wife or

daughter, to be shy; and it soon became a question with me, whether he

or Miss Matty would keep their shopmen the longest time. He thought

each shawl more beautiful than the last; and, as for Miss Matty, she

smiled and sighed over each fresh bale that was brought out; one colour

set off another, and the heap together would, as she said, make even the

rainbow look poor.

“I am afraid,” said she, hesitating, “Whichever I choose I shall wish I

had taken another. Look at this lovely crimson! it would be so warm in

winter. But spring is coming on, you know. I wish I could have a gown

for every season,” said she, dropping her voice—as we all did in

Cranford whenever we talked of anything we wished for but could not

afford. “However,” she continued in a louder and more cheerful tone, “it

would give me a great deal of trouble to take care of them if I had

them; so, I think, I’ll only take one. But which must it be, my dear?”

And now she hovered over a lilac with yellow spots, while I pulled out a

quiet sage-green that had faded into insignificance under the more

brilliant colours, but which was nevertheless a good silk in its humble

way. Our attention was called off to our neighbour. He had chosen a

shawl of about thirty shillings’ value; and his face looked broadly

happy, under the anticipation, no doubt, of the pleasant surprise he

would give to some Molly or Jenny at home; he had tugged a leathern

purse out of his breeches-pocket, and had offered a five-pound note in

payment for the shawl, and for some parcels which had been brought round

to him from the grocery counter; and it was just at this point that he

attracted our notice. The shopman was examining the note with a

puzzled, doubtful air.

“Town and County Bank! I am not sure, sir, but I believe we have

received a warning against notes issued by this bank only this morning.

I will just step and ask Mr Johnson, sir; but I’m afraid I must trouble

you for payment in cash, or in a note of a different bank.”

I never saw a man’s countenance fall so suddenly into dismay and

bewilderment. It was almost piteous to see the rapid change.

“Dang it!” said he, striking his fist down on the table, as if to try

which was the harder, “the chap talks as if notes and gold were to be

had for the picking up.”

Miss Matty had forgotten her silk gown in her interest for the man. I

don’t think she had caught the name of the bank, and in my nervous

cowardice I was anxious that she should not; and so I began admiring the

yellow-spotted lilac gown that I had been utterly condemning only a

minute before. But it was of no use.

“What bank was it? I mean, what bank did your note belong to?”

“Town and County Bank.”

“Let me see it,” said she quietly to the shopman, gently taking it out

of his hand, as he brought it back to return it to the farmer.

Mr Johnson was very sorry, but, from information he had received, the

notes issued by that bank were little better than waste paper.

“I don’t understand it,” said Miss Matty to me in a low voice. “That is

our bank, is it not?—the Town and County Bank?”

“Yes,” said I. “This lilac silk will just match the ribbons in your new

cap, I believe,” I continued, holding up the folds so as to catch the

light, and wishing that the man would make haste and be gone, and yet

having a new wonder, that had only just sprung up, how far it was wise

or right in me to allow Miss Matty to make this expensive purchase, if

the affairs of the bank were really so bad as the refusal of the note

implied.

But Miss Matty put on the soft dignified manner, peculiar to her, rarely

used, and yet which became her so well, and laying her hand gently on

mine, she said—

“Never mind the silks for a few minutes, dear. I don’t understand you,

sir,” turning now to the shopman, who had been attending to the farmer.

“Is this a forged note?”

“Oh, no, ma’am. It is a true note of its kind; but you see, ma’am, it

is a joint-stock bank, and there are reports out that it is likely to

break. Mr Johnson is only doing his duty, ma’am, as I am sure Mr Dobson

knows.”

But Mr Dobson could not respond to the appealing bow by any answering

smile. He was turning the note absently over in his fingers, looking

gloomily enough at the parcel containing the lately-chosen shawl.

“It’s hard upon a poor man,” said he, “as earns every farthing with the

sweat of his brow. However, there’s no help for it. You must take back

your shawl, my man; Lizzle must go on with her cloak for a while. And

yon figs for the little ones—I promised them to ’em—I’ll take them; but

the ’bacco, and the other things”—

“I will give you five sovereigns for your note, my good man,” said Miss

Matty. “I think there is some great mistake about it, for I am one of

the shareholders, and I’m sure they would have told me if things had not

been going on right.”

The shopman whispered a word or two across the table to Miss Matty. She

looked at him with a dubious air.

“Perhaps so,” said she. “But I don’t pretend to understand business; I

only know that if it is going to fail, and if honest people are to lose

their money because they have taken our notes—I can’t explain myself,”

said she, suddenly becoming aware that she had got into a long sentence

with four people for audience; “only I would rather exchange my gold for

the note, if you please,” turning to the farmer, “and then you can take

your wife the shawl. It is only going without my gown a few days

longer,” she continued, speaking to me. “Then, I have no doubt,

everything will be cleared up.”

“But if it is cleared up the wrong way?” said I.

“Why, then it will only have been common honesty in me, as a

shareholder, to have given this good man the money. I am quite clear

about it in my own mind; but, you know, I can never speak quite as

comprehensibly as others can, only you must give me your note, Mr

Dobson, if you please, and go on with your purchases with these

sovereigns.”

[Picture: You must give me your note, Mr Dobson, if you please]

The man looked at her with silent gratitude—too awkward to put his

thanks into words; but he hung back for a minute or two, fumbling with

his note.

“I’m loth to make another one lose instead of me, if it is a loss; but,

you see, five pounds is a deal of money to a man with a family; and, as

you say, ten to one in a day or two the note will be as good as gold

again.”

“No hope of that, my friend,” said the shopman.

“The more reason why I should take it,” said Miss Matty quietly. She

pushed her sovereigns towards the man, who slowly laid his note down in

exchange. “Thank you. I will wait a day or two before I purchase any

of these silks; perhaps you will then have a greater choice. My dear,

will you come upstairs?”

We inspected the fashions with as minute and curious an interest as if

the gown to be made after them had been bought. I could not see that

the little event in the shop below had in the least damped Miss Matty’s

curiosity as to the make of sleeves or the sit of skirts. She once or

twice exchanged congratulations with me on our private and leisurely

view of the bonnets and shawls; but I was, all the time, not so sure

that our examination was so utterly private, for I caught glimpses of a

figure dodging behind the cloaks and mantles; and, by a dexterous move,

I came face to face with Miss Pole, also in morning costume (the

principal feature of which was her being without teeth, and wearing a

veil to conceal the deficiency), come on the same errand as ourselves.

But she quickly took her departure, because, as she said, she had a bad

headache, and did not feel herself up to conversation.

As we came down through the shop, the civil Mr Johnson was awaiting us;

he had been informed of the exchange of the note for gold, and with much

good feeling and real kindness, but with a little want of tact, he

wished to condole with Miss Matty, and impress upon her the true state

of the case. I could only hope that he had heard an exaggerated rumour

for he said that her shares were worse than nothing, and that the bank

could not pay a shilling in the pound. I was glad that Miss Matty

seemed still a little incredulous; but I could not tell how much of this

was real or assumed, with that self-control which seemed habitual to

ladies of Miss Matty’s standing in Cranford, who would have thought

their dignity compromised by the slightest expression of surprise,

dismay, or any similar feeling to an inferior in station, or in a public

shop. However, we walked home very silently. I am ashamed to say, I

believe I was rather vexed and annoyed at Miss Matty’s conduct in taking

the note to herself so decidedly. I had so set my heart upon her having

a new silk gown, which she wanted sadly; in general she was so undecided

anybody might turn her round; in this case I had felt that it was no use

attempting it, but I was not the less put out at the result.

Somehow, after twelve o’clock, we both acknowledged to a sated curiosity

about the fashions, and to a certain fatigue of body (which was, in

fact, depression of mind) that indisposed us to go out again. But still

we never spoke of the note; till, all at once, something possessed me to

ask Miss Matty if she would think it her duty to offer sovereigns for

all the notes of the Town and County Bank she met with? I could have

bitten my tongue out the minute I had said it. She looked up rather

sadly, and as if I had thrown a new perplexity into her already

distressed mind; and for a minute or two she did not speak. Then she

said—my own dear Miss Matty—without a shade of reproach in her voice—

“My dear, I never feel as if my mind was what people call very strong;

and it’s often hard enough work for me to settle what I ought to do with

the case right before me. I was very thankful to—I was very thankful,

that I saw my duty this morning, with the poor man standing by me; but

its rather a strain upon me to keep thinking and thinking what I should

do if such and such a thing happened; and, I believe, I had rather wait

and see what really does come; and I don’t doubt I shall be helped then

if I don’t fidget myself, and get too anxious beforehand. You know,

love, I’m not like Deborah. If Deborah had lived, I’ve no doubt she

would have seen after them, before they had got themselves into this

state.”

We had neither of us much appetite for dinner, though we tried to talk

cheerfully about indifferent things. When we returned into the

drawing-room, Miss Matty unlocked her desk and began to look over her

account-books. I was so penitent for what I had said in the morning,

that I did not choose to take upon myself the presumption to suppose

that I could assist her; I rather left her alone, as, with puzzled brow,

her eye followed her pen up and down the ruled page. By-and-by she shut

the book, locked the desk, and came and drew a chair to mine, where I

sat in moody sorrow over the fire. I stole my hand into hers; she

clasped it, but did not speak a word. At last she said, with forced

composure in her voice, “If that bank goes wrong, I shall lose one

hundred and forty-nine pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence a year; I

shall only have thirteen pounds a year left.” I squeezed her hand hard

and tight. I did not know what to say. Presently (it was too dark to

see her face) I felt her fingers work convulsively in my grasp; and I

knew she was going to speak again. I heard the sobs in her voice as she

said, “I hope it’s not wrong—not wicked—but, oh! I am so glad poor

Deborah is spared this. She could not have borne to come down in the

world—she had such a noble, lofty spirit.”

This was all she said about the sister who had insisted upon investing

their little property in that unlucky bank. We were later in lighting

the candle than usual that night, and until that light shamed us into

speaking, we sat together very silently and sadly.

However, we took to our work after tea with a kind of forced

cheerfulness (which soon became real as far as it went), talking of that

never-ending wonder, Lady Glenmire’s engagement. Miss Matty was almost

coming round to think it a good thing.

“I don’t mean to deny that men are troublesome in a house. I don’t

judge from my own experience, for my father was neatness itself, and

wiped his shoes on coming in as carefully as any woman; but still a man

has a sort of knowledge of what should be done in difficulties, that it

is very pleasant to have one at hand ready to lean upon. Now, Lady

Glenmire, instead of being tossed about, and wondering where she is to

settle, will be certain of a home among pleasant and kind people, such

as our good Miss Pole and Mrs Forrester. And Mr Hoggins is really a

very personable man; and as for his manners, why, if they are not very

polished, I have known people with very good hearts and very clever

minds too, who were not what some people reckoned refined, but who were

both true and tender.”

She fell off into a soft reverie about Mr Holbrook, and I did not

interrupt her, I was so busy maturing a plan I had had in my mind for

some days, but which this threatened failure of the bank had brought to

a crisis. That night, after Miss Matty went to bed, I treacherously

lighted the candle again, and sat down in the drawing-room to compose a

letter to the Aga Jenkyns, a letter which should affect him if he were

Peter, and yet seem a mere statement of dry facts if he were a stranger.

The church clock pealed out two before I had done.

The next morning news came, both official and otherwise, that the Town

and County Bank had stopped payment. Miss Matty was ruined.

She tried to speak quietly to me; but when she came to the actual fact

that she would have but about five shillings a week to live upon, she

could not restrain a few tears.

“I am not crying for myself, dear,” said she, wiping them away; “I

believe I am crying for the very silly thought of how my mother would

grieve if she could know; she always cared for us so much more than for

herself. But many a poor person has less, and I am not very

extravagant, and, thank God, when the neck of mutton, and Martha’s

wages, and the rent are paid, I have not a farthing owing. Poor Martha!

I think she’ll be sorry to leave me.”

Miss Matty smiled at me through her tears, and she would fain have had

me see only the smile, not the tears.

CHAPTER XIV.

FRIENDS IN NEED

IT was an example to me, and I fancy it might be to many others, to see

how immediately Miss Matty set about the retrenchment which she knew to

be right under her altered circumstances. While she went down to speak

to Martha, and break the intelligence to her, I stole out with my letter

to the Aga Jenkyns, and went to the signor’s lodgings to obtain the

exact address. I bound the signora to secrecy; and indeed her military

manners had a degree of shortness and reserve in them which made her

always say as little as possible, except when under the pressure of

strong excitement. Moreover (which made my secret doubly sure), the

signor was now so far recovered as to be looking forward to travelling

and conjuring again in the space of a few days, when he, his wife, and

little Phoebe would leave Cranford. Indeed, I found him looking over a

great black and red placard, in which the Signor Brunoni’s

accomplishments were set forth, and to which only the name of the town

where he would next display them was wanting. He and his wife were so

much absorbed in deciding where the red letters would come in with most

effect (it might have been the Rubric for that matter), that it was some

time before I could get my question asked privately, and not before I

had given several decisions, the which I questioned afterwards with

equal wisdom of sincerity as soon as the signor threw in his doubts and

reasons on the important subject. At last I got the address, spelt by

sound, and very queer it looked. I dropped it in the post on my way

home, and then for a minute I stood looking at the wooden pane with a

gaping slit which divided me from the letter but a moment ago in my

hand. It was gone from me like life, never to be recalled. It would

get tossed about on the sea, and stained with sea-waves perhaps, and be

carried among palm-trees, and scented with all tropical fragrance; the

little piece of paper, but an hour ago so familiar and commonplace, had

set out on its race to the strange wild countries beyond the Ganges!

But I could not afford to lose much time on this speculation. I

hastened home, that Miss Matty might not miss me. Martha opened the door

to me, her face swollen with crying. As soon as she saw me she burst

out afresh, and taking hold of my arm she pulled me in, and banged the

door to, in order to ask me if indeed it was all true that Miss Matty

had been saying.

“I’ll never leave her! No; I won’t. I telled her so, and said I could

not think how she could find in her heart to give me warning. I could

not have had the face to do it, if I’d been her. I might ha’ been just

as good for nothing as Mrs Fitz-Adam’s Rosy, who struck for wages after

living seven years and a half in one place. I said I was not one to go

and serve Mammon at that rate; that I knew when I’d got a good missus,

if she didn’t know when she’d got a good servant”—

“But, Martha,” said I, cutting in while she wiped her eyes.

“Don’t, ‘but Martha’ me,” she replied to my deprecatory tone.

“Listen to reason”—

“I’ll not listen to reason,” she said, now in full possession of her

voice, which had been rather choked with sobbing. “Reason always means

what someone else has got to say. Now I think what I’ve got to say is

good enough reason; but reason or not, I’ll say it, and I’ll stick to

it. I’ve money in the Savings Bank, and I’ve a good stock of clothes,

and I’m not going to leave Miss Matty. No, not if she gives me warning

every hour in the day!”

She put her arms akimbo, as much as to say she defied me; and, indeed, I

could hardly tell how to begin to remonstrate with her, so much did I

feel that Miss Matty, in her increasing infirmity, needed the attendance

of this kind and faithful woman.

“Well”—said I at last.

“I’m thankful you begin with ‘well!’ If you’d have begun with ‘but,’ as

you did afore, I’d not ha’ listened to you. Now you may go on.”

“I know you would be a great loss to Miss Matty, Martha”—

“I telled her so. A loss she’d never cease to be sorry for,” broke in

Martha triumphantly.

“Still, she will have so little—so very little—to live upon, that I

don’t see just now how she could find you food—she will even be pressed

for her own. I tell you this, Martha, because I feel you are like a

friend to dear Miss Matty, but you know she might not like to have it

spoken about.”

Apparently this was even a blacker view of the subject than Miss Matty

had presented to her, for Martha just sat down on the first chair that

came to hand, and cried out loud (we had been standing in the kitchen).

At last she put her apron down, and looking me earnestly in the face,

asked, “Was that the reason Miss Matty wouldn’t order a pudding to-day?

She said she had no great fancy for sweet things, and you and she would

just have a mutton chop. But I’ll be up to her. Never you tell, but

I’ll make her a pudding, and a pudding she’ll like, too, and I’ll pay

for it myself; so mind you see she eats it. Many a one has been

comforted in their sorrow by seeing a good dish come upon the table.”

I was rather glad that Martha’s energy had taken the immediate and

practical direction of pudding-making, for it staved off the quarrelsome

discussion as to whether she should or should not leave Miss Matty’s

service. She began to tie on a clean apron, and otherwise prepare

herself for going to the shop for the butter, eggs, and what else she

might require. She would not use a scrap of the articles already in the

house for her cookery, but went to an old tea-pot in which her private

store of money was deposited, and took out what she wanted.

I found Miss Matty very quiet, and not a little sad; but by-and-by she

tried to smile for my sake. It was settled that I was to write to my

father, and ask him to come over and hold a consultation, and as soon as

this letter was despatched we began to talk over future plans. Miss

Matty’s idea was to take a single room, and retain as much of her

furniture as would be necessary to fit up this, and sell the rest, and

there to quietly exist upon what would remain after paying the rent.

For my part, I was more ambitious and less contented. I thought of all

the things by which a woman, past middle age, and with the education

common to ladies fifty years ago, could earn or add to a living without

materially losing caste; but at length I put even this last clause on

one side, and wondered what in the world Miss Matty could do.

Teaching was, of course, the first thing that suggested itself. If Miss

Matty could teach children anything, it would throw her among the little

elves in whom her soul delighted. I ran over her accomplishments. Once

upon a time I had heard her say she could play “Ah! vous dirai-je,

maman?” on the piano, but that was long, long ago; that faint shadow of

musical acquirement had died out years before. She had also once been

able to trace out patterns very nicely for muslin embroidery, by dint of

placing a piece of silver paper over the design to be copied, and

holding both against the window-pane while she marked the scollop and

eyelet-holes. But that was her nearest approach to the accomplishment

of drawing, and I did not think it would go very far. Then again, as to

the branches of a solid English education—fancy work and the use of the

globes—such as the mistress of the Ladies’ Seminary, to which all the

tradespeople in Cranford sent their daughters, professed to teach. Miss

Matty’s eyes were failing her, and I doubted if she could discover the

number of threads in a worsted-work pattern, or rightly appreciate the

different shades required for Queen Adelaide’s face in the loyal

wool-work now fashionable in Cranford. As for the use of the globes, I

had never been able to find it out myself, so perhaps I was not a good

judge of Miss Matty’s capability of instructing in this branch of

education; but it struck me that equators and tropics, and such mystical

circles, were very imaginary lines indeed to her, and that she looked

upon the signs of the Zodiac as so many remnants of the Black Art.

What she piqued herself upon, as arts in which she excelled, was making

candle-lighters, or “spills” (as she preferred calling them), of

coloured paper, cut so as to resemble feathers, and knitting garters in

a variety of dainty stitches. I had once said, on receiving a present

of an elaborate pair, that I should feel quite tempted to drop one of

them in the street, in order to have it admired; but I found this little

joke (and it was a very little one) was such a distress to her sense of

propriety, and was taken with such anxious, earnest alarm, lest the

temptation might some day prove too strong for me, that I quite

regretted having ventured upon it. A present of these

delicately-wrought garters, a bunch of gay “spills,” or a set of cards

on which sewing-silk was wound in a mystical manner, were the well-known

tokens of Miss Matty’s favour. But would any one pay to have their

children taught these arts? or, indeed, would Miss Matty sell, for

filthy lucre, the knack and the skill with which she made trifles of

value to those who loved her?

I had to come down to reading, writing, and arithmetic; and, in reading

the chapter every morning, she always coughed before coming to long

words. I doubted her power of getting through a genealogical chapter,

with any number of coughs. Writing she did well and delicately—but

spelling! She seemed to think that the more out-of-the-way this was,

and the more trouble it cost her, the greater the compliment she paid to

her correspondent; and words that she would spell quite correctly in her

letters to me became perfect enigmas when she wrote to my father.

No! there was nothing she could teach to the rising generation of

Cranford, unless they had been quick learners and ready imitators of her

patience, her humility, her sweetness, her quiet contentment with all

that she could not do. I pondered and pondered until dinner was

announced by Martha, with a face all blubbered and swollen with crying.

Miss Matty had a few little peculiarities which Martha was apt to regard

as whims below her attention, and appeared to consider as childish

fancies of which an old lady of fifty-eight should try and cure herself.

But to-day everything was attended to with the most careful regard. The

bread was cut to the imaginary pattern of excellence that existed in

Miss Matty’s mind, as being the way which her mother had preferred, the

curtain was drawn so as to exclude the dead brick wall of a neighbour’s

stable, and yet left so as to show every tender leaf of the poplar which

was bursting into spring beauty. Martha’s tone to Miss Matty was just

such as that good, rough-spoken servant usually kept sacred for little

children, and which I had never heard her use to any grown-up person.

I had forgotten to tell Miss Matty about the pudding, and I was afraid

she might not do justice to it, for she had evidently very little

appetite this day; so I seized the opportunity of letting her into the

secret while Martha took away the meat. Miss Matty’s eyes filled with

tears, and she could not speak, either to express surprise or delight,

when Martha returned bearing it aloft, made in the most wonderful

representation of a lion \_couchant\_ that ever was moulded. Martha’s

face gleamed with triumph as she set it down before Miss Matty with an

exultant “There!” Miss Matty wanted to speak her thanks, but could not;

so she took Martha’s hand and shook it warmly, which set Martha off

crying, and I myself could hardly keep up the necessary composure.

Martha burst out of the room, and Miss Matty had to clear her voice once

or twice before she could speak. At last she said, “I should like to

keep this pudding under a glass shade, my dear!” and the notion of the

lion \_couchant\_, with his currant eyes, being hoisted up to the place of

honour on a mantelpiece, tickled my hysterical fancy, and I began to

laugh, which rather surprised Miss Matty.

“I am sure, dear, I have seen uglier things under a glass shade before

now,” said she.

So had I, many a time and oft, and I accordingly composed my countenance

(and now I could hardly keep from crying), and we both fell to upon the

pudding, which was indeed excellent—only every morsel seemed to choke

us, our hearts were so full.

We had too much to think about to talk much that afternoon. It passed

over very tranquilly. But when the tea-urn was brought in a new thought

came into my head. Why should not Miss Matty sell tea—be an agent to

the East India Tea Company which then existed? I could see no

objections to this plan, while the advantages were many—always supposing

that Miss Matty could get over the degradation of condescending to

anything like trade. Tea was neither greasy nor sticky—grease and

stickiness being two of the qualities which Miss Matty could not endure.

No shop-window would be required. A small, genteel notification of her

being licensed to sell tea would, it is true, be necessary, but I hoped

that it could be placed where no one would see it. Neither was tea a

heavy article, so as to tax Miss Matty’s fragile strength. The only

thing against my plan was the buying and selling involved.

While I was giving but absent answers to the questions Miss Matty was

putting—almost as absently—we heard a clumping sound on the stairs, and

a whispering outside the door, which indeed once opened and shut as if

by some invisible agency. After a little while Martha came in, dragging

after her a great tall young man, all crimson with shyness, and finding

his only relief in perpetually sleeking down his hair.

“Please, ma’am, he’s only Jem Hearn,” said Martha, by way of an

introduction; and so out of breath was she that I imagine she had had

some bodily struggle before she could overcome his reluctance to be

presented on the courtly scene of Miss Matilda Jenkyns’s drawing-room.

“And please, ma’am, he wants to marry me off-hand. And please, ma’am,

we want to take a lodger—just one quiet lodger, to make our two ends

meet; and we’d take any house conformable; and, oh dear Miss Matty, if I

may be so bold, would you have any objections to lodging with us? Jem

wants it as much as I do.” [To Jem ]—“You great oaf! why can’t you back

me!—But he does want it all the same, very bad—don’t you, Jem?—only, you

see, he’s dazed at being called on to speak before quality.”

[Picture: Please, ma’am, he wants to marry me off-hand]

“It’s not that,” broke in Jem. “It’s that you’ve taken me all on a

sudden, and I didn’t think for to get married so soon—and such quick

words does flabbergast a man. It’s not that I’m against it, ma’am”

(addressing Miss Matty), “only Martha has such quick ways with her when

once she takes a thing into her head; and marriage, ma’am—marriage nails

a man, as one may say. I dare say I shan’t mind it after it’s once

over.”

“Please, ma’am,” said Martha—who had plucked at his sleeve, and nudged

him with her elbow, and otherwise tried to interrupt him all the time

he had been speaking—“don’t mind him, he’ll come to; ’twas only last

night he was an-axing me, and an-axing me, and all the more because I

said I could not think of it for years to come, and now he’s only taken

aback with the suddenness of the joy; but you know, Jem, you are just as

full as me about wanting a lodger.” (Another great nudge.)

“Ay! if Miss Matty would lodge with us—otherwise I’ve no mind to be

cumbered with strange folk in the house,” said Jem, with a want of tact

which I could see enraged Martha, who was trying to represent a lodger

as the great object they wished to obtain, and that, in fact, Miss Matty

would be smoothing their path and conferring a favour, if she would only

come and live with them.

Miss Matty herself was bewildered by the pair; their, or rather Martha’s

sudden resolution in favour of matrimony staggered her, and stood

between her and the contemplation of the plan which Martha had at heart.

Miss Matty began—

“Marriage is a very solemn thing, Martha.”

“It is indeed, ma’am,” quoth Jem. “Not that I’ve no objections to

Martha.”

“You’ve never let me a-be for asking me for to fix when I would be

married,” said Martha—her face all a-fire, and ready to cry with

vexation—“and now you’re shaming me before my missus and all.”

“Nay, now! Martha don’t ee! don’t ee! only a man likes to have

breathing-time,” said Jem, trying to possess himself of her hand, but in

vain. Then seeing that she was more seriously hurt than he had

imagined, he seemed to try to rally his scattered faculties, and with

more straightforward dignity than, ten minutes before, I should have

thought it possible for him to assume, he turned to Miss Matty, and

said, “I hope, ma’am, you know that I am bound to respect every one who

has been kind to Martha. I always looked on her as to be my wife—some

time; and she has often and often spoken of you as the kindest lady that

ever was; and though the plain truth is, I would not like to be troubled

with lodgers of the common run, yet if, ma’am, you’d honour us by living

with us, I’m sure Martha would do her best to make you comfortable; and

I’d keep out of your way as much as I could, which I reckon would be the

best kindness such an awkward chap as me could do.”

Miss Matty had been very busy with taking off her spectacles, wiping

them, and replacing them; but all she could say was, “Don’t let any

thought of me hurry you into marriage: pray don’t. Marriage is such a

very solemn thing!”

“But Miss Matilda will think of your plan, Martha,” said I, struck with

the advantages that it offered, and unwilling to lose the opportunity of

considering about it. “And I’m sure neither she nor I can ever forget

your kindness; nor yours either, Jem.”

“Why, yes, ma’am! I’m sure I mean kindly, though I’m a bit fluttered by

being pushed straight ahead into matrimony, as it were, and mayn’t

express myself conformable. But I’m sure I’m willing enough, and give

me time to get accustomed; so, Martha, wench, what’s the use of crying

so, and slapping me if I come near?”

This last was \_sotto voce\_, and had the effect of making Martha bounce

out of the room, to be followed and soothed by her lover. Whereupon

Miss Matty sat down and cried very heartily, and accounted for it by

saying that the thought of Martha being married so soon gave her quite a

shock, and that she should never forgive herself if she thought she was

hurrying the poor creature. I think my pity was more for Jem, of the

two; but both Miss Matty and I appreciated to the full the kindness of

the honest couple, although we said little about this, and a good deal

about the chances and dangers of matrimony.

The next morning, very early, I received a note from Miss Pole, so

mysteriously wrapped up, and with so many seals on it to secure secrecy,

that I had to tear the paper before I could unfold it. And when I came

to the writing I could hardly understand the meaning, it was so involved

and oracular. I made out, however, that I was to go to Miss Pole’s at

eleven o’clock; the number \_eleven\_ being written in full length as well

as in numerals, and \_A.M.\_ twice dashed under, as if I were very likely

to come at eleven at night, when all Cranford was usually abed and

asleep by ten. There was no signature except Miss Pole’s initials

reversed, P.E.; but as Martha had given me the note, “with Miss Pole’s

kind regards,” it needed no wizard to find out who sent it; and if the

writer’s name was to be kept secret, it was very well that I was alone

when Martha delivered it.

I went as requested to Miss Pole’s. The door was opened to me by her

little maid Lizzy in Sunday trim, as if some grand event was impending

over this work-day. And the drawing-room upstairs was arranged in

accordance with this idea. The table was set out with the best green

card-cloth, and writing materials upon it. On the little chiffonier was

a tray with a newly-decanted bottle of cowslip wine, and some

ladies’-finger biscuits. Miss Pole herself was in solemn array, as if

to receive visitors, although it was only eleven o’clock. Mrs Forrester

was there, crying quietly and sadly, and my arrival seemed only to call

forth fresh tears. Before we had finished our greetings, performed with

lugubrious mystery of demeanour, there was another rat-tat-tat, and Mrs

Fitz-Adam appeared, crimson with walking and excitement. It seemed as

if this was all the company expected; for now Miss Pole made several

demonstrations of being about to open the business of the meeting, by

stirring the fire, opening and shutting the door, and coughing and

blowing her nose. Then she arranged us all round the table, taking care

to place me opposite to her; and last of all, she inquired of me if the

sad report was true, as she feared it was, that Miss Matty had lost all

her fortune?

Of course, I had but one answer to make; and I never saw more unaffected

sorrow depicted on any countenances than I did there on the three before

me.

“I wish Mrs Jamieson was here!” said Mrs Forrester at last; but to judge

from Mrs Fitz-Adam’s face, she could not second the wish.

“But without Mrs Jamieson,” said Miss Pole, with just a sound of

offended merit in her voice, “we, the ladies of Cranford, in my

drawing-room assembled, can resolve upon something. I imagine we are

none of us what may be called rich, though we all possess a genteel

competency, sufficient for tastes that are elegant and refined, and

would not, if they could, be vulgarly ostentatious.” (Here I observed

Miss Pole refer to a small card concealed in her hand, on which I

imagine she had put down a few notes.)

“Miss Smith,” she continued, addressing me (familiarly known as “Mary”

to all the company assembled, but this was a state occasion), “I have

conversed in private—I made it my business to do so yesterday

afternoon—with these ladies on the misfortune which has happened to our

friend, and one and all of us have agreed that while we have a

superfluity, it is not only a duty, but a pleasure—a true pleasure,

Mary!”—her voice was rather choked just here, and she had to wipe her

spectacles before she could go on—“to give what we can to assist

her—Miss Matilda Jenkyns. Only in consideration of the feelings of

delicate independence existing in the mind of every refined female”—I

was sure she had got back to the card now—“we wish to contribute our

mites in a secret and concealed manner, so as not to hurt the feelings I

have referred to. And our object in requesting you to meet us this

morning is that, believing you are the daughter—that your father is, in

fact, her confidential adviser, in all pecuniary matters, we imagined

that, by consulting with him, you might devise some mode in which our

contribution could be made to appear the legal due which Miss Matilda

Jenkyns ought to receive from— Probably your father, knowing her

investments, can fill up the blank.”

Miss Pole concluded her address, and looked round for approval and

agreement.

“I have expressed your meaning, ladies, have I not? And while Miss

Smith considers what reply to make, allow me to offer you some little

refreshment.”

I had no great reply to make: I had more thankfulness at my heart for

their kind thoughts than I cared to put into words; and so I only

mumbled out something to the effect “that I would name what Miss Pole

had said to my father, and that if anything could be arranged for dear

Miss Matty,”—and here I broke down utterly, and had to be refreshed with

a glass of cowslip wine before I could check the crying which had been

repressed for the last two or three days. The worst was, all the ladies

cried in concert. Even Miss Pole cried, who had said a hundred times

that to betray emotion before any one was a sign of weakness and want of

self-control. She recovered herself into a slight degree of impatient

anger, directed against me, as having set them all off; and, moreover, I

think she was vexed that I could not make a speech back in return for

hers; and if I had known beforehand what was to be said, and had a card

on which to express the probable feelings that would rise in my heart, I

would have tried to gratify her. As it was, Mrs Forrester was the

person to speak when we had recovered our composure.

“I don’t mind, among friends, stating that I—no! I’m not poor exactly,

but I don’t think I’m what you may call rich; I wish I were, for dear

Miss Matty’s sake—but, if you please, I’ll write down in a sealed paper

what I can give. I only wish it was more; my dear Mary, I do indeed.”

Now I saw why paper, pens, and ink were provided. Every lady wrote down

the sum she could give annually, signed the paper, and sealed it

mysteriously. If their proposal was acceded to, my father was to be

allowed to open the papers, under pledge of secrecy. If not, they were

to be returned to their writers.

When the ceremony had been gone through, I rose to depart; but each lady

seemed to wish to have a private conference with me. Miss Pole kept me

in the drawing-room to explain why, in Mrs Jamieson’s absence, she had

taken the lead in this “movement,” as she was pleased to call it, and

also to inform me that she had heard from good sources that Mrs Jamieson

was coming home directly in a state of high displeasure against her

sister-in-law, who was forthwith to leave her house, and was, she

believed, to return to Edinburgh that very afternoon. Of course this

piece of intelligence could not be communicated before Mrs Fitz-Adam,

more especially as Miss Pole was inclined to think that Lady Glenmire’s

engagement to Mr Hoggins could not possibly hold against the blaze of

Mrs Jamieson’s displeasure. A few hearty inquiries after Miss Matty’s

health concluded my interview with Miss Pole.

On coming downstairs I found Mrs Forrester waiting for me at the

entrance to the dining-parlour; she drew me in, and when the door was

shut, she tried two or three times to begin on some subject, which was

so unapproachable apparently, that I began to despair of our ever

getting to a clear understanding. At last out it came; the poor old

lady trembling all the time as if it were a great crime which she was

exposing to daylight, in telling me how very, very little she had to

live upon; a confession which she was brought to make from a dread lest

we should think that the small contribution named in her paper bore any

proportion to her love and regard for Miss Matty. And yet that sum

which she so eagerly relinquished was, in truth, more than a twentieth

part of what she had to live upon, and keep house, and a little

serving-maid, all as became one born a Tyrrell. And when the whole

income does not nearly amount to a hundred pounds, to give up a

twentieth of it will necessitate many careful economies, and many pieces

of self-denial, small and insignificant in the world’s account, but

bearing a different value in another account-book that I have heard of.

She did so wish she was rich, she said, and this wish she kept

repeating, with no thought of herself in it, only with a longing,

yearning desire to be able to heap up Miss Matty’s measure of comforts.

It was some time before I could console her enough to leave her; and

then, on quitting the house, I was waylaid by Mrs Fitz-Adam, who had

also her confidence to make of pretty nearly the opposite description.

She had not liked to put down all that she could afford and was ready to

give. She told me she thought she never could look Miss Matty in the

face again if she presumed to be giving her so much as she should like

to do. “Miss Matty!” continued she, “that I thought was such a fine

young lady when I was nothing but a country girl, coming to market with

eggs and butter and such like things. For my father, though well-to-do,

would always make me go on as my mother had done before me, and I had to

come into Cranford every Saturday, and see after sales, and prices, and

what not. And one day, I remember, I met Miss Matty in the lane that

leads to Combehurst; she was walking on the footpath, which, you know,

is raised a good way above the road, and a gentleman rode beside her,

and was talking to her, and she was looking down at some primroses she

had gathered, and pulling them all to pieces, and I do believe she was

crying. But after she had passed, she turned round and ran after me to

ask—oh, so kindly—about my poor mother, who lay on her death-bed; and

when I cried she took hold of my hand to comfort me—and the gentleman

waiting for her all the time—and her poor heart very full of something,

I am sure; and I thought it such an honour to be spoken to in that

pretty way by the rector’s daughter, who visited at Arley Hall. I have

loved her ever since, though perhaps I’d no right to do it; but if you

can think of any way in which I might be allowed to give a little more

without any one knowing it, I should be so much obliged to you, my dear.

And my brother would be delighted to doctor her for nothing—medicines,

leeches, and all. I know that he and her ladyship (my dear, I little

thought in the days I was telling you of that I should ever come to be

sister-in-law to a ladyship!) would do anything for her. We all would.”

I told her I was quite sure of it, and promised all sorts of things in

my anxiety to get home to Miss Matty, who might well be wondering what

had become of me—absent from her two hours without being able to account

for it. She had taken very little note of time, however, as she had

been occupied in numberless little arrangements preparatory to the great

step of giving up her house. It was evidently a relief to her to be

doing something in the way of retrenchment, for, as she said, whenever

she paused to think, the recollection of the poor fellow with his bad

five-pound note came over her, and she felt quite dishonest; only if it

made her so uncomfortable, what must it not be doing to the directors of

the bank, who must know so much more of the misery consequent upon this

failure? She almost made me angry by dividing her sympathy between

these directors (whom she imagined overwhelmed by self-reproach for the

mismanagement of other people’s affairs) and those who were suffering

like her. Indeed, of the two, she seemed to think poverty a lighter

burden than self-reproach; but I privately doubted if the directors

would agree with her.

Old hoards were taken out and examined as to their money value which

luckily was small, or else I don’t know how Miss Matty would have

prevailed upon herself to part with such things as her mother’s

wedding-ring, the strange, uncouth brooch with which her father had

disfigured his shirt-frill, &c. However, we arranged things a little in

order as to their pecuniary estimation, and were all ready for my father

when he came the next morning.

I am not going to weary you with the details of all the business we went

through; and one reason for not telling about them is, that I did not

understand what we were doing at the time, and cannot recollect it now.

Miss Matty and I sat assenting to accounts, and schemes, and reports,

and documents, of which I do not believe we either of us understood a

word; for my father was clear-headed and decisive, and a capital man of

business, and if we made the slightest inquiry, or expressed the

slightest want of comprehension, he had a sharp way of saying, “Eh? eh?

it’s as clear as daylight. What’s your objection?” And as we had not

comprehended anything of what he had proposed, we found it rather

difficult to shape our objections; in fact, we never were sure if we had

any. So presently Miss Matty got into a nervously acquiescent state,

and said “Yes,” and “Certainly,” at every pause, whether required or

not; but when I once joined in as chorus to a “Decidedly,” pronounced by

Miss Matty in a tremblingly dubious tone, my father fired round at me

and asked me “What there was to decide?” And I am sure to this day I

have never known. But, in justice to him, I must say he had come over

from Drumble to help Miss Matty when he could ill spare the time, and

when his own affairs were in a very anxious state.

[Picture: Miss Matty and I sat assenting to accounts]

While Miss Matty was out of the room giving orders for luncheon—and

sadly perplexed between her desire of honouring my father by a delicate,

dainty meal, and her conviction that she had no right, now that all her

money was gone, to indulge this desire—I told him of the meeting of the

Cranford ladies at Miss Pole’s the day before. He kept brushing his

hand before his eyes as I spoke—and when I went back to Martha’s offer

the evening before, of receiving Miss Matty as a lodger, he fairly

walked away from me to the window, and began drumming with his fingers

upon it. Then he turned abruptly round, and said, “See, Mary, how a

good, innocent life makes friends all around. Confound it! I could

make a good lesson out of it if I were a parson; but, as it is, I can’t

get a tail to my sentences—only I’m sure you feel what I want to say.

You and I will have a walk after lunch and talk a bit more about these

plans.”

The lunch—a hot savoury mutton-chop, and a little of the cold loin

sliced and fried—was now brought in. Every morsel of this last dish was

finished, to Martha’s great gratification. Then my father bluntly told

Miss Matty he wanted to talk to me alone, and that he would stroll out

and see some of the old places, and then I could tell her what plan we

thought desirable. Just before we went out, she called me back and

said, “Remember, dear, I’m the only one left—I mean, there’s no one to

be hurt by what I do. I’m willing to do anything that’s right and

honest; and I don’t think, if Deborah knows where she is, she’ll care so

very much if I’m not genteel; because, you see, she’ll know all, dear.

Only let me see what I can do, and pay the poor people as far as I’m

able.”

I gave her a hearty kiss, and ran after my father. The result of our

conversation was this. If all parties were agreeable, Martha and Jem

were to be married with as little delay as possible, and they were to

live on in Miss Matty’s present abode; the sum which the Cranford ladies

had agreed to contribute annually being sufficient to meet the greater

part of the rent, and leaving Martha free to appropriate what Miss Matty

should pay for her lodgings to any little extra comforts required.

About the sale, my father was dubious at first. He said the old rectory

furniture, however carefully used and reverently treated, would fetch

very little; and that little would be but as a drop in the sea of the

debts of the Town and County Bank. But when I represented how Miss

Matty’s tender conscience would be soothed by feeling that she had done

what she could, he gave way; especially after I had told him the

five-pound note adventure, and he had scolded me well for allowing it.

I then alluded to my idea that she might add to her small income by

selling tea; and, to my surprise (for I had nearly given up the plan),

my father grasped at it with all the energy of a tradesman. I think he

reckoned his chickens before they were hatched, for he immediately ran

up the profits of the sales that she could effect in Cranford to more

than twenty pounds a year. The small dining-parlour was to be converted

into a shop, without any of its degrading characteristics; a table was

to be the counter; one window was to be retained unaltered, and the

other changed into a glass door. I evidently rose in his estimation for

having made this bright suggestion. I only hoped we should not both

fall in Miss Matty’s.

But she was patient and content with all our arrangements. She knew,

she said, that we should do the best we could for her; and she only

hoped, only stipulated, that she should pay every farthing that she

could be said to owe, for her father’s sake, who had been so respected

in Cranford. My father and I had agreed to say as little as possible

about the bank, indeed never to mention it again, if it could be helped.

Some of the plans were evidently a little perplexing to her; but she

had seen me sufficiently snubbed in the morning for want of

comprehension to venture on too many inquiries now; and all passed over

well with a hope on her part that no one would be hurried into marriage

on her account. When we came to the proposal that she should sell tea, I

could see it was rather a shock to her; not on account of any personal

loss of gentility involved, but only because she distrusted her own

powers of action in a new line of life, and would timidly have preferred

a little more privation to any exertion for which she feared she was

unfitted. However, when she saw my father was bent upon it, she sighed,

and said she would try; and if she did not do well, of course she might

give it up. One good thing about it was, she did not think men ever

bought tea; and it was of men particularly she was afraid. They had

such sharp loud ways with them; and did up accounts, and counted their

change so quickly! Now, if she might only sell comfits to children, she

was sure she could please them!

CHAPTER XV.

A HAPPY RETURN

BEFORE I left Miss Matty at Cranford everything had been comfortably

arranged for her. Even Mrs Jamieson’s approval of her selling tea had

been gained. That oracle had taken a few days to consider whether by so

doing Miss Matty would forfeit her right to the privileges of society in

Cranford. I think she had some little idea of mortifying Lady Glenmire

by the decision she gave at last; which was to this effect: that whereas

a married woman takes her husband’s rank by the strict laws of

precedence, an unmarried woman retains the station her father occupied.

So Cranford was allowed to visit Miss Matty; and, whether allowed or

not, it intended to visit Lady Glenmire.

But what was our surprise—our dismay—when we learnt that Mr and \_Mrs

Hoggins\_ were returning on the following Tuesday! Mrs Hoggins! Had

she absolutely dropped her title, and so, in a spirit of bravado, cut

the aristocracy to become a Hoggins! She, who might have been called

Lady Glenmire to her dying day! Mrs Jamieson was pleased. She said it

only convinced her of what she had known from the first, that the

creature had a low taste. But “the creature” looked very happy on

Sunday at church; nor did we see it necessary to keep our veils down on

that side of our bonnets on which Mr and Mrs Hoggins sat, as Mrs

Jamieson did; thereby missing all the smiling glory of his face, and all

the becoming blushes of hers. I am not sure if Martha and Jem looked

more radiant in the afternoon, when they, too, made their first

appearance. Mrs Jamieson soothed the turbulence of her soul by having

the blinds of her windows drawn down, as if for a funeral, on the day

when Mr and Mrs Hoggins received callers; and it was with some

difficulty that she was prevailed upon to continue the \_St James’s

Chronicle\_, so indignant was she with its having inserted the

announcement of the marriage.

[Picture: Smiling glory ... and becoming blushes]

Miss Matty’s sale went off famously. She retained the furniture of her

sitting-room and bedroom; the former of which she was to occupy till

Martha could meet with a lodger who might wish to take it; and into this

sitting-room and bedroom she had to cram all sorts of things, which were

(the auctioneer assured her) bought in for her at the sale by an unknown

friend. I always suspected Mrs Fitz-Adam of this; but she must have had

an accessory, who knew what articles were particularly regarded by Miss

Matty on account of their associations with her early days. The rest of

the house looked rather bare, to be sure; all except one tiny bedroom,

of which my father allowed me to purchase the furniture for my

occasional use in case of Miss Matty’s illness.

I had expended my own small store in buying all manner of comfits and

lozenges, in order to tempt the little people whom Miss Matty loved so

much to come about her. Tea in bright green canisters, and comfits in

tumblers—Miss Matty and I felt quite proud as we looked round us on the

evening before the shop was to be opened. Martha had scoured the

boarded floor to a white cleanness, and it was adorned with a brilliant

piece of oil-cloth, on which customers were to stand before the

table-counter. The wholesome smell of plaster and whitewash pervaded the

apartment. A very small “Matilda Jenkyns, licensed to sell tea,” was

hidden under the lintel of the new door, and two boxes of tea, with

cabalistic inscriptions all over them, stood ready to disgorge their

contents into the canisters.

Miss Matty, as I ought to have mentioned before, had had some scruples

of conscience at selling tea when there was already Mr Johnson in the

town, who included it among his numerous commodities; and, before she

could quite reconcile herself to the adoption of her new business, she

had trotted down to his shop, unknown to me, to tell him of the project

that was entertained, and to inquire if it was likely to injure his

business. My father called this idea of hers “great nonsense,” and

“wondered how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual

consulting of each other’s interests, which would put a stop to all

competition directly.” And, perhaps, it would not have done in Drumble,

but in Cranford it answered very well; for not only did Mr Johnson

kindly put at rest all Miss Matty’s scruples and fear of injuring his

business, but I have reason to know he repeatedly sent customers to her,

saying that the teas he kept were of a common kind, but that Miss

Jenkyns had all the choice sorts. And expensive tea is a very favourite

luxury with well-to-do tradespeople and rich farmers’ wives, who turn up

their noses at the Congou and Souchong prevalent at many tables of

gentility, and will have nothing else than Gunpowder and Pekoe for

themselves.

But to return to Miss Matty. It was really very pleasant to see how her

unselfishness and simple sense of justice called out the same good

qualities in others. She never seemed to think any one would impose

upon her, because she should be so grieved to do it to them. I have

heard her put a stop to the asseverations of the man who brought her

coals by quietly saying, “I am sure you would be sorry to bring me wrong

weight;” and if the coals were short measure that time, I don’t believe

they ever were again. People would have felt as much ashamed of

presuming on her good faith as they would have done on that of a child.

But my father says “such simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but

would never do in the world.” And I fancy the world must be very bad,

for with all my father’s suspicion of every one with whom he has

dealings, and in spite of all his many precautions, he lost upwards of a

thousand pounds by roguery only last year.

I just stayed long enough to establish Miss Matty in her new mode of

life, and to pack up the library, which the rector had purchased. He

had written a very kind letter to Miss Matty, saying “how glad he should

be to take a library, so well selected as he knew that the late Mr

Jenkyns’s must have been, at any valuation put upon them.” And when she

agreed to this, with a touch of sorrowful gladness that they would go

back to the rectory and be arranged on the accustomed walls once more,

he sent word that he feared that he had not room for them all, and

perhaps Miss Matty would kindly allow him to leave some volumes on her

shelves. But Miss Matty said that she had her Bible and “Johnson’s

Dictionary,” and should not have much time for reading, she was afraid;

still, I retained a few books out of consideration for the rector’s

kindness.

The money which he had paid, and that produced by the sale, was partly

expended in the stock of tea, and part of it was invested against a

rainy day—\_i.e.\_ old age or illness. It was but a small sum, it is

true; and it occasioned a few evasions of truth and white lies (all of

which I think very wrong indeed—in theory—and would rather not put them

in practice), for we knew Miss Matty would be perplexed as to her duty

if she were aware of any little reserve-fund being made for her while

the debts of the bank remained unpaid. Moreover, she had never been

told of the way in which her friends were contributing to pay the rent.

I should have liked to tell her this, but the mystery of the affair gave

a piquancy to their deed of kindness which the ladies were unwilling to

give up; and at first Martha had to shirk many a perplexed question as

to her ways and means of living in such a house, but by-and-by Miss

Matty’s prudent uneasiness sank down into acquiescence with the existing

arrangement.

I left Miss Matty with a good heart. Her sales of tea during the first

two days had surpassed my most sanguine expectations. The whole country

round seemed to be all out of tea at once. The only alteration I could

have desired in Miss Matty’s way of doing business was, that she should

not have so plaintively entreated some of her customers not to buy green

tea—running it down as a slow poison, sure to destroy the nerves, and

produce all manner of evil. Their pertinacity in taking it, in spite of

all her warnings, distressed her so much that I really thought she would

relinquish the sale of it, and so lose half her custom; and I was driven

to my wits’ end for instances of longevity entirely attributable to a

persevering use of green tea. But the final argument, which settled the

question, was a happy reference of mine to the train-oil and tallow

candles which the Esquimaux not only enjoy but digest. After that she

acknowledged that “one man’s meat might be another man’s poison,” and

contented herself thence-forward with an occasional remonstrance when

she thought the purchaser was too young and innocent to be acquainted

with the evil effects green tea produced on some constitutions, and an

habitual sigh when people old enough to choose more wisely would prefer

it.

I went over from Drumble once a quarter at least to settle the accounts,

and see after the necessary business letters. And, speaking of letters,

I began to be very much ashamed of remembering my letter to the Aga

Jenkyns, and very glad I had never named my writing to any one. I only

hoped the letter was lost. No answer came. No sign was made.

About a year after Miss Matty set up shop, I received one of Martha’s

hieroglyphics, begging me to come to Cranford very soon. I was afraid

that Miss Matty was ill, and went off that very afternoon, and took

Martha by surprise when she saw me on opening the door. We went into

the kitchen as usual, to have our confidential conference, and then

Martha told me she was expecting her confinement very soon—in a week or

two; and she did not think Miss Matty was aware of it, and she wanted me

to break the news to her, “for indeed, miss,” continued Martha, crying

hysterically, “I’m afraid she won’t approve of it, and I’m sure I don’t

know who is to take care of her as she should be taken care of when I am

laid up.”

I comforted Martha by telling her I would remain till she was about

again, and only wished she had told me her reason for this sudden

summons, as then I would have brought the requisite stock of clothes.

But Martha was so tearful and tender-spirited, and unlike her usual

self, that I said as little as possible about myself, and endeavoured

rather to comfort Martha under all the probable and possible misfortunes

which came crowding upon her imagination.

I then stole out of the house-door, and made my appearance as if I were

a customer in the shop, just to take Miss Matty by surprise, and gain an

idea of how she looked in her new situation. It was warm May weather,

so only the little half-door was closed; and Miss Matty sat behind the

counter, knitting an elaborate pair of garters; elaborate they seemed to

me, but the difficult stitch was no weight upon her mind, for she was

singing in a low voice to herself as her needles went rapidly in and

out. I call it singing, but I dare say a musician would not use that

word to the tuneless yet sweet humming of the low worn voice. I found

out from the words, far more than from the attempt at the tune, that it

was the Old Hundredth she was crooning to herself; but the quiet

continuous sound told of content, and gave me a pleasant feeling, as I

stood in the street just outside the door, quite in harmony with that

soft May morning. I went in. At first she did not catch who it was,

and stood up as if to serve me; but in another minute watchful pussy had

clutched her knitting, which was dropped in eager joy at seeing me. I

found, after we had had a little conversation, that it was as Martha

said, and that Miss Matty had no idea of the approaching household

event. So I thought I would let things take their course, secure that

when I went to her with the baby in my arms, I should obtain that

forgiveness for Martha which she was needlessly frightening herself into

believing that Miss Matty would withhold, under some notion that the new

claimant would require attentions from its mother that it would be

faithless treason to Miss Matty to render.

But I was right. I think that must be an hereditary quality, for my

father says he is scarcely ever wrong. One morning, within a week after

I arrived, I went to call Miss Matty, with a little bundle of flannel in

my arms. She was very much awestruck when I showed her what it was, and

asked for her spectacles off the dressing-table, and looked at it

curiously, with a sort of tender wonder at its small perfection of

parts. She could not banish the thought of the surprise all day, but

went about on tiptoe, and was very silent. But she stole up to see

Martha and they both cried with joy, and she got into a complimentary

speech to Jem, and did not know how to get out of it again, and was only

extricated from her dilemma by the sound of the shop-bell, which was an

equal relief to the shy, proud, honest Jem, who shook my hand so

vigorously when I congratulated him, that I think I feel the pain of it

yet.

[Picture: I went to call Miss Matty]

I had a busy life while Martha was laid up. I attended on Miss Matty,

and prepared her meals; I cast up her accounts, and examined into the

state of her canisters and tumblers. I helped her, too, occasionally,

in the shop; and it gave me no small amusement, and sometimes a little

uneasiness, to watch her ways there. If a little child came in to ask

for an ounce of almond-comfits (and four of the large kind which Miss

Matty sold weighed that much), she always added one more by “way of

make-weight,” as she called it, although the scale was handsomely turned

before; and when I remonstrated against this, her reply was, “The little

things like it so much!” There was no use in telling her that the fifth

comfit weighed a quarter of an ounce, and made every sale into a loss to

her pocket. So I remembered the green tea, and winged my shaft with a

feather out of her own plumage. I told her how unwholesome

almond-comfits were, and how ill excess in them might make the little

children. This argument produced some effect; for, henceforward,

instead of the fifth comfit, she always told them to hold out their tiny

palms, into which she shook either peppermint or ginger lozenges, as a

preventive to the dangers that might arise from the previous sale.

Altogether the lozenge trade, conducted on these principles, did not

promise to be remunerative; but I was happy to find she had made more

than twenty pounds during the last year by her sales of tea; and,

moreover, that now she was accustomed to it, she did not dislike the

employment, which brought her into kindly intercourse with many of the

people round about. If she gave them good weight, they, in their turn,

brought many a little country present to the “old rector’s daughter”; a

cream cheese, a few new-laid eggs, a little fresh ripe fruit, a bunch of

flowers. The counter was quite loaded with these offerings sometimes,

as she told me.

As for Cranford in general, it was going on much as usual. The Jamieson

and Hoggins feud still raged, if a feud it could be called, when only

one side cared much about it. Mr and Mrs Hoggins were very happy

together, and, like most very happy people, quite ready to be friendly;

indeed, Mrs Hoggins was really desirous to be restored to Mrs Jamieson’s

good graces, because of the former intimacy. But Mrs Jamieson

considered their very happiness an insult to the Glenmire family, to

which she had still the honour to belong, and she doggedly refused and

rejected every advance. Mr Mulliner, like a faithful clansman, espoused

his mistress’ side with ardour. If he saw either Mr or Mrs Hoggins, he

would cross the street, and appear absorbed in the contemplation of life

in general, and his own path in particular, until he had passed them by.

Miss Pole used to amuse herself with wondering what in the world Mrs

Jamieson would do, if either she, or Mr Mulliner, or any other member of

her household was taken ill; she could hardly have the face to call in

Mr Hoggins after the way she had behaved to them. Miss Pole grew quite

impatient for some indisposition or accident to befall Mrs Jamieson or

her dependents, in order that Cranford might see how she would act under

the perplexing circumstances.

Martha was beginning to go about again, and I had already fixed a limit,

not very far distant, to my visit, when one afternoon, as I was sitting

in the shop-parlour with Miss Matty—I remember the weather was colder

now than it had been in May, three weeks before, and we had a fire and

kept the door fully closed—we saw a gentleman go slowly past the window,

and then stand opposite to the door, as if looking out for the name

which we had so carefully hidden. He took out a double eyeglass and

peered about for some time before he could discover it. Then he came

in. And, all on a sudden, it flashed across me that it was the Aga

himself! For his clothes had an out-of-the-way foreign cut about them,

and his face was deep brown, as if tanned and re-tanned by the sun. His

complexion contrasted oddly with his plentiful snow-white hair, his eyes

were dark and piercing, and he had an odd way of contracting them and

puckering up his cheeks into innumerable wrinkles when he looked

earnestly at objects. He did so to Miss Matty when he first came in.

His glance had first caught and lingered a little upon me, but then

turned, with the peculiar searching look I have described, to Miss

Matty. She was a little fluttered and nervous, but no more so than she

always was when any man came into her shop. She thought that he would

probably have a note, or a sovereign at least, for which she would have

to give change, which was an operation she very much disliked to

perform. But the present customer stood opposite to her, without asking

for anything, only looking fixedly at her as he drummed upon the table

with his fingers, just for all the world as Miss Jenkyns used to do.

Miss Matty was on the point of asking him what he wanted (as she told me

afterwards), when he turned sharp to me: “Is your name Mary Smith?”

“Yes!” said I.

All my doubts as to his identity were set at rest, and I only wondered

what he would say or do next, and how Miss Matty would stand the joyful

shock of what he had to reveal. Apparently he was at a loss how to

announce himself, for he looked round at last in search of something to

buy, so as to gain time, and, as it happened, his eye caught on the

almond-comfits, and he boldly asked for a pound of “those things.” I

doubt if Miss Matty had a whole pound in the shop, and, besides the

unusual magnitude of the order, she was distressed with the idea of the

indigestion they would produce, taken in such unlimited quantities. She

looked up to remonstrate. Something of tender relaxation in his face

struck home to her heart. She said, “It is—oh, sir! can you be Peter?”

and trembled from head to foot. In a moment he was round the table and

had her in his arms, sobbing the tearless cries of old age. I brought

her a glass of wine, for indeed her colour had changed so as to alarm me

and Mr Peter too. He kept saying, “I have been too sudden for you,

Matty—I have, my little girl.”

I proposed that she should go at once up into the drawing-room and lie

down on the sofa there. She looked wistfully at her brother, whose hand

she had held tight, even when nearly fainting; but on his assuring her

that he would not leave her, she allowed him to carry her upstairs.

I thought that the best I could do was to run and put the kettle on the

fire for early tea, and then to attend to the shop, leaving the brother

and sister to exchange some of the many thousand things they must have

to say. I had also to break the news to Martha, who received it with a

burst of tears which nearly infected me. She kept recovering herself to

ask if I was sure it was indeed Miss Matty’s brother, for I had

mentioned that he had grey hair, and she had always heard that he was a

very handsome young man. Something of the same kind perplexed Miss

Matty at tea-time, when she was installed in the great easy-chair

opposite to Mr Jenkyns in order to gaze her fill. She could hardly

drink for looking at him, and as for eating, that was out of the

question.

“I suppose hot climates age people very quickly,” said she, almost to

herself. “When you left Cranford you had not a grey hair in your head.”

“But how many years ago is that?” said Mr Peter, smiling.

“Ah, true! yes, I suppose you and I are getting old. But still I did

not think we were so very old! But white hair is very becoming to you,

Peter,” she continued—a little afraid lest she had hurt him by revealing

how his appearance had impressed her.

“I suppose I forgot dates too, Matty, for what do you think I have

brought for you from India? I have an Indian muslin gown and a pearl

necklace for you somewhere in my chest at Portsmouth.” He smiled as if

amused at the idea of the incongruity of his presents with the

appearance of his sister; but this did not strike her all at once, while

the elegance of the articles did. I could see that for a moment her

imagination dwelt complacently on the idea of herself thus attired; and

instinctively she put her hand up to her throat—that little delicate

throat which (as Miss Pole had told me) had been one of her youthful

charms; but the hand met the touch of folds of soft muslin in which she

was always swathed up to her chin, and the sensation recalled a sense of

the unsuitableness of a pearl necklace to her age. She said, “I’m

afraid I’m too old; but it was very kind of you to think of it. They

are just what I should have liked years ago—when I was young.”

“So I thought, my little Matty. I remembered your tastes; they were so

like my dear mother’s.” At the mention of that name the brother and

sister clasped each other’s hands yet more fondly, and, although they

were perfectly silent, I fancied they might have something to say if

they were unchecked by my presence, and I got up to arrange my room for

Mr Peter’s occupation that night, intending myself to share Miss Matty’s

bed. But at my movement, he started up. “I must go and settle about a

room at the ‘George.’ My carpet-bag is there too.”

“No!” said Miss Matty, in great distress—“you must not go; please, dear

Peter—pray, Mary—oh! you must not go!”

She was so much agitated that we both promised everything she wished.

Peter sat down again and gave her his hand, which for better security

she held in both of hers, and I left the room to accomplish my

arrangements.

Long, long into the night, far, far into the morning, did Miss Matty and

I talk. She had much to tell me of her brother’s life and adventures,

which he had communicated to her as they had sat alone. She said all

was thoroughly clear to her; but I never quite understood the whole

story; and when in after days I lost my awe of Mr Peter enough to

question him myself, he laughed at my curiosity, and told me stories

that sounded so very much like Baron Munchausen’s, that I was sure he

was making fun of me. What I heard from Miss Matty was that he had been

a volunteer at the siege of Rangoon; had been taken prisoner by the

Burmese; and somehow obtained favour and eventual freedom from knowing

how to bleed the chief of the small tribe in some case of dangerous

illness; that on his release from years of captivity he had had his

letters returned from England with the ominous word “Dead” marked upon

them; and, believing himself to be the last of his race, he had settled

down as an indigo planter, and had proposed to spend the remainder of

his life in the country to whose inhabitants and modes of life he had

become habituated, when my letter had reached him; and, with the odd

vehemence which characterised him in age as it had done in youth, he had

sold his land and all his possessions to the first purchaser, and come

home to the poor old sister, who was more glad and rich than any

princess when she looked at him. She talked me to sleep at last, and

then I was awakened by a slight sound at the door, for which she begged

my pardon as she crept penitently into bed; but it seems that when I

could no longer confirm her belief that the long-lost was really

here—under the same roof—she had begun to fear lest it was only a waking

dream of hers; that there never had been a Peter sitting by her all that

blessed evening—but that the real Peter lay dead far away beneath some

wild sea-wave, or under some strange eastern tree. And so strong had

this nervous feeling of hers become, that she was fain to get up and go

and convince herself that he was really there by listening through the

door to his even, regular breathing—I don’t like to call it snoring, but

I heard it myself through two closed doors—and by-and-by it soothed Miss

Matty to sleep.

I don’t believe Mr Peter came home from India as rich as a nabob; he

even considered himself poor, but neither he nor Miss Matty cared much

about that. At any rate, he had enough to live upon “very genteelly” at

Cranford; he and Miss Matty together. And a day or two after his

arrival, the shop was closed, while troops of little urchins gleefully

awaited the shower of comfits and lozenges that came from time to time

down upon their faces as they stood up-gazing at Miss Matty’s

drawing-room windows. Occasionally Miss Matty would say to them

(half-hidden behind the curtains), “My dear children, don’t make

yourselves ill;” but a strong arm pulled her back, and a more rattling

shower than ever succeeded. A part of the tea was sent in presents to

the Cranford ladies; and some of it was distributed among the old people

who remembered Mr Peter in the days of his frolicsome youth. The Indian

muslin gown was reserved for darling Flora Gordon (Miss Jessie Brown’s

daughter). The Gordons had been on the Continent for the last few

years, but were now expected to return very soon; and Miss Matty, in her

sisterly pride, anticipated great delight in the joy of showing them Mr

Peter. The pearl necklace disappeared; and about that time many

handsome and useful presents made their appearance in the households of

Miss Pole and Mrs Forrester; and some rare and delicate Indian ornaments

graced the drawing-rooms of Mrs Jamieson and Mrs Fitz-Adam. I myself

was not forgotten. Among other things, I had the handsomest-bound and

best edition of Dr Johnson’s works that could be procured; and dear Miss

Matty, with tears in her eyes, begged me to consider it as a present

from her sister as well as herself. In short, no one was forgotten;

and, what was more, every one, however insignificant, who had shown

kindness to Miss Matty at any time, was sure of Mr Peter’s cordial

regard.

CHAPTER XVI.

PEACE TO CRANFORD

IT was not surprising that Mr Peter became such a favourite at Cranford.

The ladies vied with each other who should admire him most; and no

wonder, for their quiet lives were astonishingly stirred up by the

arrival from India—especially as the person arrived told more wonderful

stories than Sindbad the Sailor; and, as Miss Pole said, was quite as

good as an Arabian Night any evening. For my own part, I had vibrated

all my life between Drumble and Cranford, and I thought it was quite

possible that all Mr Peter’s stories might be true, although wonderful;

but when I found that, if we swallowed an anecdote of tolerable

magnitude one week, we had the dose considerably increased the next, I

began to have my doubts; especially as I noticed that when his sister

was present the accounts of Indian life were comparatively tame; not

that she knew more than we did, perhaps less. I noticed also that when

the rector came to call, Mr Peter talked in a different way about the

countries he had been in. But I don’t think the ladies in Cranford

would have considered him such a wonderful traveller if they had only

heard him talk in the quiet way he did to him. They liked him the

better, indeed, for being what they called “so very Oriental.”

One day, at a select party in his honour, which Miss Pole gave, and from

which, as Mrs Jamieson honoured it with her presence, and had even

offered to send Mr Mulliner to wait, Mr and Mrs Hoggins and Mrs

Fitz-Adam were necessarily excluded—one day at Miss Pole’s, Mr Peter

said he was tired of sitting upright against the hard-backed uneasy

chairs, and asked if he might not indulge himself in sitting

cross-legged. Miss Pole’s consent was eagerly given, and down he went

with the utmost gravity. But when Miss Pole asked me, in an audible

whisper, “if he did not remind me of the Father of the Faithful?” I

could not help thinking of poor Simon Jones, the lame tailor, and while

Mrs Jamieson slowly commented on the elegance and convenience of the

attitude, I remembered how we had all followed that lady’s lead in

condemning Mr Hoggins for vulgarity because he simply crossed his legs

as he sat still on his chair. Many of Mr Peter’s ways of eating were a

little strange amongst such ladies as Miss Pole, and Miss Matty, and Mrs

Jamieson, especially when I recollected the untasted green peas and

two-pronged forks at poor Mr Holbrook’s dinner.

The mention of that gentleman’s name recalls to my mind a conversation

between Mr Peter and Miss Matty one evening in the summer after he

returned to Cranford. The day had been very hot, and Miss Matty had

been much oppressed by the weather, in the heat of which her brother

revelled. I remember that she had been unable to nurse Martha’s baby,

which had become her favourite employment of late, and which was as much

at home in her arms as in its mother’s, as long as it remained a

light-weight, portable by one so fragile as Miss Matty. This day to

which I refer, Miss Matty had seemed more than usually feeble and

languid, and only revived when the sun went down, and her sofa was

wheeled to the open window, through which, although it looked into the

principal street of Cranford, the fragrant smell of the neighbouring

hayfields came in every now and then, borne by the soft breezes that

stirred the dull air of the summer twilight, and then died away. The

silence of the sultry atmosphere was lost in the murmuring noises which

came in from many an open window and door; even the children were abroad

in the street, late as it was (between ten and eleven), enjoying the

game of play for which they had not had spirits during the heat of the

day. It was a source of satisfaction to Miss Matty to see how few

candles were lighted, even in the apartments of those houses from which

issued the greatest signs of life. Mr Peter, Miss Matty, and I had all

been quiet, each with a separate reverie, for some little time, when Mr

Peter broke in—

“Do you know, little Matty, I could have sworn you were on the high road

to matrimony when I left England that last time! If anybody had told me

you would have lived and died an old maid then, I should have laughed in

their faces.”

Miss Matty made no reply, and I tried in vain to think of some subject

which should effectually turn the conversation; but I was very stupid;

and before I spoke he went on—

“It was Holbrook, that fine manly fellow who lived at Woodley, that I

used to think would carry off my little Matty. You would not think it

now, I dare say, Mary; but this sister of mine was once a very pretty

girl—at least, I thought so, and so I’ve a notion did poor Holbrook.

What business had he to die before I came home to thank him for all his

kindness to a good-for-nothing cub as I was? It was that that made me

first think he cared for you; for in all our fishing expeditions it was

Matty, Matty, we talked about. Poor Deborah! What a lecture she read

me on having asked him home to lunch one day, when she had seen the

Arley carriage in the town, and thought that my lady might call. Well,

that’s long years ago; more than half a life-time, and yet it seems like

yesterday! I don’t know a fellow I should have liked better as a

brother-in-law. You must have played your cards badly, my little Matty,

somehow or another—wanted your brother to be a good go-between, eh,

little one?” said he, putting out his hand to take hold of hers as she

lay on the sofa. “Why, what’s this? you’re shivering and shaking,

Matty, with that confounded open window. Shut it, Mary, this minute!”

I did so, and then stooped down to kiss Miss Matty, and see if she

really were chilled. She caught at my hand, and gave it a hard

squeeze—but unconsciously, I think—for in a minute or two she spoke to

us quite in her usual voice, and smiled our uneasiness away, although

she patiently submitted to the prescriptions we enforced of a warm bed

and a glass of weak negus. I was to leave Cranford the next day, and

before I went I saw that all the effects of the open window had quite

vanished. I had superintended most of the alterations necessary in the

house and household during the latter weeks of my stay. The shop was

once more a parlour: the empty resounding rooms again furnished up to

the very garrets.

There had been some talk of establishing Martha and Jem in another

house, but Miss Matty would not hear of this. Indeed, I never saw her

so much roused as when Miss Pole had assumed it to be the most desirable

arrangement. As long as Martha would remain with Miss Matty, Miss Matty

was only too thankful to have her about her; yes, and Jem too, who was a

very pleasant man to have in the house, for she never saw him from

week’s end to week’s end. And as for the probable children, if they

would all turn out such little darlings as her god-daughter, Matilda,

she should not mind the number, if Martha didn’t. Besides, the next was

to be called Deborah—a point which Miss Matty had reluctantly yielded to

Martha’s stubborn determination that her first-born was to be Matilda.

So Miss Pole had to lower her colours, and even her voice, as she said

to me that, as Mr and Mrs Hearn were still to go on living in the same

house with Miss Matty, we had certainly done a wise thing in hiring

Martha’s niece as an auxiliary.

I left Miss Matty and Mr Peter most comfortable and contented; the only

subject for regret to the tender heart of the one, and the social

friendly nature of the other, being the unfortunate quarrel between Mrs

Jamieson and the plebeian Hogginses and their following. In joke, I

prophesied one day that this would only last until Mrs Jamieson or Mr

Mulliner were ill, in which case they would only be too glad to be

friends with Mr Hoggins; but Miss Matty did not like my looking forward

to anything like illness in so light a manner, and before the year was

out all had come round in a far more satisfactory way.

I received two Cranford letters on one auspicious October morning. Both

Miss Pole and Miss Matty wrote to ask me to come over and meet the

Gordons, who had returned to England alive and well with their two

children, now almost grown up. Dear Jessie Brown had kept her old kind

nature, although she had changed her name and station; and she wrote to

say that she and Major Gordon expected to be in Cranford on the

fourteenth, and she hoped and begged to be remembered to Mrs Jamieson

(named first, as became her honourable station), Miss Pole and Miss

Matty—could she ever forget their kindness to her poor father and

sister?—Mrs Forrester, Mr Hoggins (and here again came in an allusion to

kindness shown to the dead long ago), his new wife, who as such must

allow Mrs Gordon to desire to make her acquaintance, and who was,

moreover, an old Scotch friend of her husband’s. In short, every one

was named, from the rector—who had been appointed to Cranford in the

interim between Captain Brown’s death and Miss Jessie’s marriage, and

was now associated with the latter event—down to Miss Betty Barker. All

were asked to the luncheon; all except Mrs Fitz-Adam, who had come to

live in Cranford since Miss Jessie Brown’s days, and whom I found rather

moping on account of the omission. People wondered at Miss Betty

Barker’s being included in the honourable list; but, then, as Miss Pole

said, we must remember the disregard of the genteel proprieties of life

in which the poor captain had educated his girls, and for his sake we

swallowed our pride. Indeed, Mrs Jamieson rather took it as a

compliment, as putting Miss Betty (formerly \_her\_ maid) on a level with

“those Hogginses.”

But when I arrived in Cranford, nothing was as yet ascertained of Mrs

Jamieson’s own intentions; would the honourable lady go, or would she

not? Mr Peter declared that she should and she would; Miss Pole shook

her head and desponded. But Mr Peter was a man of resources. In the

first place, he persuaded Miss Matty to write to Mrs Gordon, and to tell

her of Mrs Fitz-Adam’s existence, and to beg that one so kind, and

cordial, and generous, might be included in the pleasant invitation. An

answer came back by return of post, with a pretty little note for Mrs

Fitz-Adam, and a request that Miss Matty would deliver it herself and

explain the previous omission. Mrs Fitz-Adam was as pleased as could

be, and thanked Miss Matty over and over again. Mr Peter had said,

“Leave Mrs Jamieson to me;” so we did; especially as we knew nothing

that we could do to alter her determination if once formed.

I did not know, nor did Miss Matty, how things were going on, until Miss

Pole asked me, just the day before Mrs Gordon came, if I thought there

was anything between Mr Peter and Mrs Jamieson in the matrimonial line,

for that Mrs Jamieson was really going to the lunch at the “George.”

She had sent Mr Mulliner down to desire that there might be a footstool

put to the warmest seat in the room, as she meant to come, and knew that

their chairs were very high. Miss Pole had picked this piece of news

up, and from it she conjectured all sorts of things, and bemoaned yet

more. “If Peter should marry, what would become of poor dear Miss Matty?

And Mrs Jamieson, of all people!” Miss Pole seemed to think there were

other ladies in Cranford who would have done more credit to his choice,

and I think she must have had someone who was unmarried in her head, for

she kept saying, “It was so wanting in delicacy in a widow to think of

such a thing.”

When I got back to Miss Matty’s I really did begin to think that Mr

Peter might be thinking of Mrs Jamieson for a wife, and I was as unhappy

as Miss Pole about it. He had the proof sheet of a great placard in his

hand. “Signor Brunoni, Magician to the King of Delhi, the Rajah of

Oude, and the great Lama of Thibet,” &c. &c., was going to “perform in

Cranford for one night only,” the very next night; and Miss Matty,

exultant, showed me a letter from the Gordons, promising to remain over

this gaiety, which Miss Matty said was entirely Peter’s doing. He had

written to ask the signor to come, and was to be at all the expenses of

the affair. Tickets were to be sent gratis to as many as the room would

hold. In short, Miss Matty was charmed with the plan, and said that

to-morrow Cranford would remind her of the Preston Guild, to which she

had been in her youth—a luncheon at the “George,” with the dear Gordons,

and the signor in the Assembly Room in the evening. But I—I looked only

at the fatal words:—

“\_Under the Patronage of the\_ HONOURABLE MRS JAMIESON.”

She, then, was chosen to preside over this entertainment of Mr Peter’s;

she was perhaps going to displace my dear Miss Matty in his heart, and

make her life lonely once more! I could not look forward to the morrow

with any pleasure; and every innocent anticipation of Miss Matty’s only

served to add to my annoyance.

So, angry and irritated, and exaggerating every little incident which

could add to my irritation, I went on till we were all assembled in the

great parlour at the “George.” Major and Mrs Gordon and pretty Flora

and Mr Ludovic were all as bright and handsome and friendly as could be;

but I could hardly attend to them for watching Mr Peter, and I saw that

Miss Pole was equally busy. I had never seen Mrs Jamieson so roused and

animated before; her face looked full of interest in what Mr Peter was

saying. I drew near to listen. My relief was great when I caught that

his words were not words of love, but that, for all his grave face, he

was at his old tricks. He was telling her of his travels in India, and

describing the wonderful height of the Himalaya mountains: one touch

after another added to their size, and each exceeded the former in

absurdity; but Mrs Jamieson really enjoyed all in perfect good faith. I

suppose she required strong stimulants to excite her to come out of her

apathy. Mr Peter wound up his account by saying that, of course, at

that altitude there were none of the animals to be found that existed in

the lower regions; the game,—everything was different. Firing one day

at some flying creature, he was very much dismayed when it fell, to find

that he had shot a cherubim! Mr Peter caught my eye at this moment, and

gave me such a funny twinkle, that I felt sure he had no thoughts of Mrs

Jamieson as a wife from that time. She looked uncomfortably amazed—

“But, Mr Peter, shooting a cherubim—don’t you think—I am afraid that was

sacrilege!”

Mr Peter composed his countenance in a moment, and appeared shocked at

the idea, which, as he said truly enough, was now presented to him for

the first time; but then Mrs Jamieson must remember that he had been

living for a long time among savages—all of whom were heathens—some of

them, he was afraid, were downright Dissenters. Then, seeing Miss Matty

draw near, he hastily changed the conversation, and after a little

while, turning to me, he said, “Don’t be shocked, prim little Mary, at

all my wonderful stories. I consider Mrs Jamieson fair game, and

besides I am bent on propitiating her, and the first step towards it is

keeping her well awake. I bribed her here by asking her to let me have

her name as patroness for my poor conjuror this evening; and I don’t

want to give her time enough to get up her rancour against the

Hogginses, who are just coming in. I want everybody to be friends, for

it harasses Matty so much to hear of these quarrels. I shall go at it

again by-and-by, so you need not look shocked. I intend to enter the

Assembly Room to-night with Mrs Jamieson on one side, and my lady, Mrs

Hoggins, on the other. You see if I don’t.”

Somehow or another he did; and fairly got them into conversation

together. Major and Mrs Gordon helped at the good work with their

perfect ignorance of any existing coolness between any of the

inhabitants of Cranford.

Ever since that day there has been the old friendly sociability in

Cranford society; which I am thankful for, because of my dear Miss

Matty’s love of peace and kindliness. We all love Miss Matty, and I

somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us.

\* \* \* \* \*

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