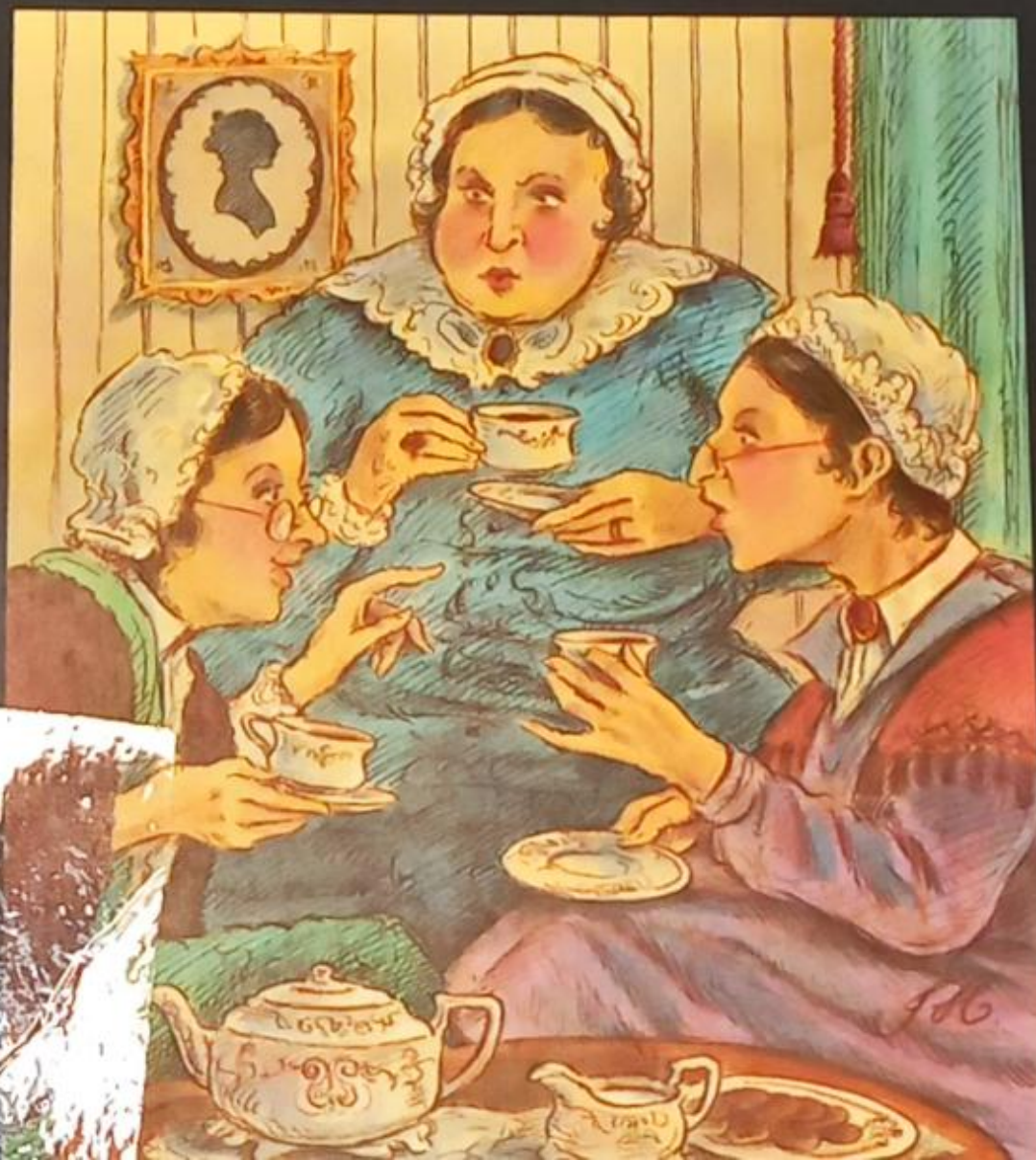


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4

Cranford

ELIZABETH GASKELL




CRAFNFORD

In Cranford nobody is very rich, but you must not talk about being poor. Indeed not! That would be a very vulgar thing to do. And in Cranford it is important not to be vulgar. At the Honourable Mrs Jamieson's evening parties there is only thin bread-and-butter (expensive food would be vulgar), and Miss Deborah Jenkyns is extremely cross when Miss Jessie Brown talks openly about her shopkeeper uncle. An uncle in trade! What horror!

The rules of society were different 150 years ago, but people stay the same. The ladies of Cranford are just like people in any age. They can be sad, happy, proud, brave, angry, jealous – and very kind. When dear, gentle Miss Matty is in trouble, everybody wants to help her. And though there are many sadnesses in Miss Matty's life, there is also a very happy surprise waiting for her . . .





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1



Our society

The first thing to say is that Cranford is held by the ladies. They rent all the best houses. If a married couple comes to live in the town, the gentleman soon disappears from sight. He is either frightened away by being the only man at the Cranford evening parties or he is at his business all week in Drumble, twenty miles away by train.

Anyway, what is there for a gentleman to do in Cranford? The town already has a doctor, and the ladies manage everything else perfectly well themselves. They keep the gardens tidy and their maid-servants busy. They have opinions on every important matter without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments. They know exactly what everyone in the town is doing. They are kind to the poor and, usually, very kind and friendly to each other.

'A man,' as one of them said to me once, 'is *terribly* in the way in the house!'

The Cranford ladies are not fashionable, and they prefer the old ways. When I lived there, they had exact rules for visiting, which they explained most seriously to any young people who came to stay: 'Our friends have asked how you are, my dear, after your journey. They are sure to call on you

the day after tomorrow, so be ready to receive them from twelve o'clock. From twelve to three are our calling hours.'

Then, after the friends had called: 'Always return a call within three days, my dear. And never stay longer than a quarter of an hour.'

The result of this rule, of course, was that nothing interesting was ever discussed. We talked about things like the weather, and left at the right time.

One or two of the Cranford ladies were poor, I imagine, but they tried to hide it, and the others kindly helped. When Mrs Forrester gave a party and her little maid had to get the tea-tray from under the sofa on which we sat, everyone just went on talking. And when Mrs Forrester pretended she did not know what cakes were on the tray, no one looked surprised. But we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, that she had made the cakes herself that morning.

In fact, the Cranfordians thought it was 'vulgar' (a favourite word) to give anything expensive to eat or drink at their evening parties. Thin bread-and-butter was all that the Honourable Mrs Jamieson gave – and *she* was related to the late Lord Glenmire.

Yes, spending money was always 'vulgar', and we certainly did not tell anyone that we had very little to spend. So I shall never forget the horror when an old army captain came to live in Cranford and spoke openly about being poor! In the street! The ladies were already rather cross about the arrival of a gentleman, and even more cross that he was going to

work for a new railway near the town. If, as well as being a man and working for that awful railway, Captain Brown was going to talk about being poor, *then nobody must speak to him.*



*The little maid had to get the tea-tray
from under the sofa.*

I was surprised, therefore, when I visited the town a year after the captain arrived, to discover that he had made himself very popular. My own friends had been strongly against calling on him, but now they welcomed him into their house, even before twelve o'clock in the morning. He had been friendly and sensible, though the Cranford ladies had been cool, and at last his helpfulness had won him a place in their hearts.

Captain Brown was living, with his two daughters, in a small house on the edge of the town. He was probably over sixty at this time, though he looked younger. In fact, Miss Brown, his elder daughter, looked almost as old as he did. She was only about forty, but her face was white and tired.

Miss Jessie Brown was ten years younger and twenty times prettier. Her face was round and had dimples. Miss Jenkyns once said, when she was annoyed with Captain Brown (for a reason I'll explain later), that it was time Miss Jessie stopped having dimples and looking like a child. There was indeed something childish about the way she looked, but I liked her face. So did everybody – and I do not think she could prevent the dimples.

I first saw the Brown family together in Cranford church. The captain sang loudly and happily; and when we came out, he smiled at everyone and patiently helped Miss Brown with her umbrella.

I wondered what the Cranford ladies did with him at their card-parties. We had often been glad in the past that there were no gentlemen to worry about. Indeed, we had almost