

since the opening of the shop. It was Martha who wrote to me this time... a very strange letter a little difficult to decipher... but she begged me very urgently to come... so come I did, hardly stopping to pack my bag... and very curious indeed as to what could need my attention so urgently in Cranford...

(Exit Mrs. GASKELL.)

(Enter Miss BARKER at front door. She carries a silk parasol which she closes as she enters. On her arm is her shopping basket.)

Miss B. (very brightly). Good morning, Miss Matty... what a lovely day!

Miss Matty (looking up from her crochet). Why, Miss Barker... good morning. It is beautiful is it not...?

Miss B. Has the new Pekoe come in yet...?

Miss Matty (patting the canister). Yes, indeed, last evening.

Miss B. Then a quarter of a pound, please...

(Miss Matty opens the canister and prepares to serve the tea—then pauses.)

Miss Matty. I have not tasted it yet... but if you could call again in about twenty minutes I could brew a pot and we might try it...

(Enter Jem from kitchen... He crosses to front door.)

Jem. Mornin', Miss Barker...

Miss B. Good morning, Jem... How is Martha...?

Jem (starting to polish the sign on the door). She's well enough, thank you, ma'am... leastways as well as you might expect... (He is gazing up the street.)

Miss B. (moving C.). And why are you not at work this morning, Jem...?

Miss Matty. He has a holiday today... But Jem! That is the third time this morning you have polished that sign... Jem (slightly confused). Is that so, ma'am... well now...

(He takes a last look up the street and returns towards the kitchen.) Miss Matty. And would you please ask Martha to put the kettle on...

Jem (very vague and preoccupied). Yes, ma'am... the kettle... Kettle o' water, ma'am...?

Miss Matty. Of course, Jem... to make tea... Boiling water...

Jem. Yes, ma'am... boiling water... (Exit Jem to kitchen.)

Miss Matty. I cannot think what has come over Jem these last few weeks. He seems so strange and pre-occupied... Miss B. Well, I'll just run down to Johnson's and call in later for the tea... Oh, I forgot... I picked these for you from my garden... red currants—

(She produces from her basket a pottery basin of red currants.)

Miss Matty. Oh, Miss Barker...! How good of you...! (They are placed with the other offerings on the counter.)

Miss B. (moving to door). Have to pick them... before the birds get at them...

(She is half way out of the door when she pops her head back in...)

By the way... I just heard from Mrs. Deacon at the Coach and Horses... Mrs. Jamieson's got the gout...

Miss Matty. Poor woman! Badly?

Miss B. (telegraphically). Severe pain... big toe... left foot...

(Exit Miss Barker.)

(Miss Matty shakes her head sympathetically and resumes her crochet work. As she works she starts to sing softly to herself.)

Miss Matty is so busy with her work that she does not notice when MARY enters. She peeps round the door and then softly tiptoes to the counter. She is wearing a summer dress, and a straw hat... she carries her own bag...

MARY. A pound of Pekoe, please, Miss Jenkyns...

Miss Matty (starting up, at first to serve a customer... then seeing who it is). Why, Mary...!

(MARY, dropping her bag, runs D.S. below counter. They embrace.)

MARY. Miss Matty...!

Miss Matty (not waiting for answers). But why did you not warn me that you were coming, my dear...? How pretty