

**CRANFORD. WITH A  
PREFACE BY ANNE  
THACKERAY RITCHIE**

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Cranford. With a Preface by Anne Thackeray Ritchie by Mrs. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell & Anne Thackeray Ritchie

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**MRS. ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL & ANNE THACKERAY RITCHIE**

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"A Walk with Mr. Holbrook."

# CRANFORD

BY

MRS. GASKELL

WITH A PREFACE BY

ANNE THACKERAY RITCHIE



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## i

My father has written of the memories connected with the writing of books, and of the scenes and feelings which are printed on the pages, quite other from those which they recount. And there are also the associations of the readers as well as of the writers. One scene in *Cranford* always comes back to me, not only for its own most pathetic value, but because I saw my father reading it. I can still remember him coming through the doorway just as I had finished the chapter, when not without some agitation and excitement I put the close printed number of *Household Words* into his hand. It was in the little dining-room of his house in Young Street, by gas light, just before dinner-time. The story was that of Captain Brown, and he sat down and read it then and there, and afterwards told me the writer's name. But indeed I did not think of it as a story at all, it seemed to me rather that I had witnessed some most touching and heroic deed, some sad disaster, and though I was a grown

girl at the time I had a foolish childish wish for my father's sympathy, and a feeling that even yet he might avert the catastrophe. Dear Captain Brown! in his shabby wig and faded coat, loved and remembered far beyond the narrow boundaries of Cranford — the city of the Amazons, the home of Miss Pole, and Miss Matty, and Miss Jenkyns, the place where economy was always "elegant," where "though some might be poor we were all aristocratic." Ever since the winter's evening when I made my first acquaintance with that delightful place it has seemed to me something of a visionary country home, which I have visited at intervals all my life long (in spirit) for refreshment and change of scene. I have been there in good company. "Thank you for your letter," Charlotte Brontë writes to Mrs. Gaskell in 1853. "It was as pleasant as a quiet chat, as welcome as spring showers, as reviving as a friend's visit; in short, it was very like a page of *Cranford*." . . . The quotation breaks off with little dots, but I am sure that each of them represents a happy moment for Currer Bell, who had not many such in her sad life.

There is a most interesting notice of Mrs. Gaskell in the *Biographical Dictionary*, in which Lord Houghton is quoted as writing of *Cranford*, as "the finest piece of humoristic description that has been added to British literature since Charles Lamb." I had been thinking of *Elia* after re-reading the book, and I was pleased to find myself on the steps of such a critic as Lord Houghton. One could imagine Mrs. Sarah Battle and the poor relation dwelling in Cranford, and if Charles Lamb could have liked anything



that was not London, he too might have fancied the place. Perhaps Miss Austen's ladies may also have visited there, but I feel less certainty about *them*, they belong to a different condition of things, to a more lively love-making set of people, both younger in age and older in generation than the Cranford ladies. Cranford is farther removed from the world, and yet more attuned to its larger interests than Meryton or Kellynch or Hartfield. Drumble, the great noisy manufacturing town, is its metropolis, not Bath with its succession of card parties and Assembly Rooms. At Cranford love is a memory rather than a present emotion; the sentimental locks of hair have turned to gray, the *billet doux* to yellow, like autumn leaves falling from the Tree of Life, but there is more of real feeling in these few signs of what was once, than in all the Misses Bennett's youthful romances put together. Only Miss Austen's very sweetest heroines (including her own irresistible dark-eyed self, in her big cap and folded kerchief) are worthy of the old place. I should give the freedom of Cranford, were it mine to bestow, in the usual "handsome casket," to Anne Elliott, to Fanny Price perhaps . . . but as I write some spirit of compunction disturbs the "*obiter dicta*" of a hasty moment. Where is one to draw the line! Lady Bertram and the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson would surely have been kindred souls, delightful creatures both with their divergences. Who will ever forget Lady Bertram's plea for morality, or Mrs. Jamieson's languid replies to Miss-Matty's inquiries as to the preparations expected in a gentleman's dressing-room, those answers given in the wearied manner of

the Scandinavian prophetess, "Leave me, leave me to repose."

But it is all very well to decide who shall and who shall not in turn be a dweller in this favoured spot! Cranford chooses its own inhabitants, and is everywhere, where people have individuality and kindness, and where oddities are tolerated, nay, greatly loved for the sake of the individuals.

I am sure Cranford existed in the quarter in Paris where my own early youth was passed. I can remember it in Kensington also, though we did not quite go the length of putting our cows into gray flannel dressing-gowns, as Miss Betsy Barker did. Perhaps Cranford did not even stop at Kensington, but may have reached farther afield, taking Chiswick on its way. Miss Deborah, as she preferred to be called, is certainly first cousin to Miss Pinkerton; can either of these ladies have been connected with the unrivalled Miss Seward herself? I do not quite know upon what terms Miss Seward and Dr. Johnson happen to be, but I could imagine the great lexicographer driving them all before him and Miss Pinkerton's turban, or Miss Jenkyns in her little helmet-like bonnet.

Miss Deborah and Miss Pinkerton belong to an altogether bygone type, but all the rest of the ladies in Cranford are as modern and as much alive as if they had been born in the 60's.

"I believe the art of telling a story is born with some people," writes the author of *Cranford*; it was certainly born with Mrs. Gaskell. My sister and I were once under the same roof with her in the house of our friends

Mr. and Mrs. George Smith, and the remembrance of *her voice* comes back to me, harmoniously flowing on and on, with spirit and intention, and delightful emphasis, as we all sat indoors one gusty morning listening to her ghost stories. They were Scotch ghosts, historical ghosts, spirited ghosts, with faded uniforms and nice old powered queues. As I think it over I am suddenly struck by the immense superiority of the ghosts of my youth to the present legion of unclean spirits which surround us, as we are told — wielding teacups, smashing accordions and banjos, breaking furniture in bits. That morning at Hampstead, which I recall, was of a different order of things, spiritual and unseen; mystery was there, romantic feeling, some holy terror and emotion, all combined to keep us gratefully silent and delighted.

## II

It is something for us Cockneys to know that Mrs. Gaskell belongs to London after all, if only as a baby. Although so much of her life was spent in the North, and Knutsford was the home of her childhood, and Manchester that of her married life, yet she was born in Chelsea. She was born in 1810, in pretty old Lindsay Place, of which the windows — ancient lights even then — still look out upon the river at its turn, as it flows from Cheyne Row, towards the sunset, past Fulham Palace, where the Bishops dwell, and Hampton Court and its histories, out into the country plains beyond.