

# When Visitors Come To Tea

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In which an extraterrestrial receives a lesson in politeness

When Visitors Come To Tea  
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much as you like.

The woods to the west of Mr. Cranford's estate were aglow with blue-bells. All three of his daughters; Anna, Madeleine and Frances, had spent the morning strolling under the bright spring branches. Frances, the youngest, had not returned with the others and was late for luncheon.

"Where have you been girl? We were beginning to worry about you!"

"I was delayed, Mamma. I took the long path and time got away from me."

Her mother watched the faint blush on the young girl's cheeks.

"There is more to this," she thought to herself, but she did not press her in front of the others. "At least," she thought, "it has stopped the girl bothering Jenkins about her father's machinery in barn." Frances was given to such stubborn enthusiasms, a condition from which her elder sisters had never seemed to suffer.

Mr. Cranford was often away on business. The family had established a routine to follow during his absences. The servants would have the meals ready at the usual times. Each of the girls would be given an assignment of books to have read upon their father's return. He told them on the eve of every trip "Girls, life is full of excitement and opportunities to learn, do not miss a single one!" They would entertain other local families for tea, but seldom for dinner, preferring to save such invitations for the times when Mr. Cranford was once more at home.

Frances was late for luncheon several times before the family would come to know who it was who delayed her in the woods, for, of course, she was delayed by a most singular person.

It was a warm spring afternoon. The servants had cleared the table and the family had gone to sit in the gazebo overlooking the manicured lawn and the gently splashing fountain.

Anna had a book open on her lap; Madeleine was working at some embroidery. Frances opened her book, but was not reading.

“Mamma?”

“Yes, Frances.”

“May I invite someone to tea?”

“Of course, dear, do we know them?”

“It is a gentleman, mother, from a long way away.”

“Really? What is his name? Where is his family from?” asked the mother, sounding more calm than she felt.

“How do you come to be acquainted with a gentleman, Franny?” sniped her eldest sister.

“Now, Anna, let Frances speak.”

“He is a visitor, Mamma. His name is Mr. Armnot. I think he is in England on his own. I do hope we can befriend him!”

“He is a foreign gentleman?”

“Oh, how exciting!” gasped Madeleine.

“I believe so, Mamma. He has an accent, but I think he is not French or German... He says he traveled for a long time to be here. Sometimes he seems to not know the correct word for what he wishes to say.”

Anna spoke slowly and deliberately, “How do you come to be of his acquaintance, Franny?”

The girl blushed and hung her head a moment. “I met him in the woods.”

“So that’s why you didn’t want to come back with us! Oh you sneak, Franny, keeping him to yourself!” said Madeleine.

“I hardly need remind you Frances, that conversing with strangers in the woods is far from proper behavior!” said her mother, concerned, “Particularly foreign strangers. Really... do you even know if he is a gentleman?”

“Yes, Mamma! He is most polite and courteous. He has told me already that he is man of great property in his home country. He owns many ships and conducts his own business—just like Pappa!”

“Well, this is most interesting... but I worry about you Frances, that you should be so bold as to strike up conversation with a stranger without your sisters being with you. That was most unwise!”

“Oh Mamma, you’ll understand better when you meet him. Can I invite him? Oh may I?”

The mother glanced at her other two daughters, both bright-eyed with anticipation.

“Very well, you may invite Mr. Armnot to tea on Thursday. But—” she held up a stern finger, “you must not stray from your sisters to see him alone. You must all introduce yourselves and offer the invitation together.”

The three girls all rose together to hug their mother and ran off onto the lawn talking excitedly.

Mr. Armnot was not as Mrs. Cranford had expected. The figure that came along the path from the woods, promptly at five minutes before three o’clock, was dressed most strangely. He was a tall man, as tall as some of the Africans Mr. Cranford had described from his early travels. His skin though was pale, more so even than Jenny Knowles, the consumptive daughter of the vicar.

Of more concern was his manner of dress. He wore a red jacket that shimmered in the sunlight. His trousers were grey and his boots were long and also bright red. He had closed his jacket to the neck, so that no sign of a tie or cravat could be seen.

“Anna!” she called as she watched their guest approach. “Mamma? Is he here already?”

“Anna, what manner of man is he? You did not tell me he was a soldier, yet he appears to be wearing a uniform!”

“Indeed mamma, we had not yet asked him about it, but it seems to be his formal wear.”

“How is it a man of property, and a businessman, is wearing such clothes?”

“Oh Mamma, he is almost here! We will soon be able to ask him.”

Mr. Armnot knocked once—rather loudly if the truth be told—on the front door. The maid announced him.

“Mr. Armnot, madam.”

“Mr. Armnot, it is good to meet you,” said the mother holding out her hand.

“My name is Arm-Naut. It is a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Cranford.”

He did indeed have something of an accent, which perhaps excused the difficulty with his name.

“Mr. Armnaut, you have already met my daughters I believe, Anna, Madeleine and, of course, Frances.”

“Yes, it was... most delightful... to make their acquaintance in the woods.”

“Come, come and have tea.”

The tea was served in the drawing room. Due to the warmth of the day, Jenkins, the butler, had opened the large doors opening to the garden. The songs of the black-birds and a thrush greeted them as they gathered round the table.

“Mr. Armnaut, what is it that brings you to England?”

Their guest frowned and said, “I come in a ship to England.”

They all laughed and the mother tried again, “No, no, Mr. Armnaut, I mean are you here for business, or do you vacation here?”

Mr. Armnaut smiled, “I am here for business. Yes, it is business that causes me to travel to many places.”

“How exciting!” said Madeleine, “Much as Pappa’s business took him to Africa when he was young.”

“Indeed.” Mrs. Cranford smiled. “And what kind of business to do you conduct, Mr. Armnaut?”

“My business is both trading and also a search for knowledge. Are you familiar with the word ‘science?’”

“But of course, Mr. Cranford himself has studied some Natural Philosophy. Though I think ‘science’ to be a dull expression for so great a field of study.”

“Then my business is Natural Philosophy. I have come to learn about the plants and animals that live here. I hope to find new medicines. The trade of medicines is thus also... my business.”

“How interesting!” Mrs. Cranford replied, “Have you met Mr. Glendenning, the Apothecary in the village? You and he may have much to speak of in common.”

“He knows of plants and animals, yes?”

“Well, of plants in great measure, and their medicinal benefits.”

“Oh, he once made up such a beneficial tonic for me when I was... unwell,” said Frances, unwilling to recall the details while at table.

“Perhaps I will visit him tomorrow.”

“Oh, Mamma, I’m sure Mr. Glendenning and Mr. Armnaut would get on famously!”

“Well then, I will send word that Mr. Glendenning should expect you, if that is agreeable Mr. Armnaut?”

“Yes. Yes, agreeable.”

Mr. Armnaut sat in his chair bolt upright and uncomfortable. He surveyed the table beneath him with some suspicion. He watched carefully the movements of the girls and followed as best he could.

“This food is most agreeable,” he said after a few mouthfuls of cook’s renowned fruit-cake.

“Why thank you, Mr. Armnaut. Our cook is from Wales. Her family has many traditional recipes that are not found normally in these parts.”

Mr. Armnaut thought for a moment.

“And this is also a picture of my business. I seek the

things not found where I live.”

“How wonderful,” the mother replied. “And where do you live, Mr. Armnaut?”

“It is far away.”

“As far as Africa?” asked Anna.

“Further even than Africa.”

“Golly.”

“May I take some of this food with me?”

“I beg your pardon?” replied Mrs. Cranford.

“This... I am sorry, what is this called?”

“Why it’s Bara Brith!”

“Yes, this Bara Brith. May I be permitted to keep some of this?”

Mrs. Cranford really did not know what to make of this request.

“Well... perhaps I can have cook make you a cake... Yes, of course, Mr. Armnaut, I will have some sent to your lodgings.”

“My lodgings?”

“Yes, I will have one of the servants bring it over. Where are you staying?”

“I stay in the woods.”

“But... there are no houses in that direction until you come to the ford! Are you staying with a family or at an inn?”

“I stay alone. I have my own... house.”

“Really? Has it been there long? I’m surprised we do not know of it!”

“No, it is quite new.”

“Well, I am surprised. Perhaps you could let us know where we may find it, and I will have the cake sent to you.”

“Yes, I will tell your servant where it is... located.”

“Very good. Now, some more tea?”

Anna asked, “Are you in the army, Mr. Armnaut?”

“The army?”

“Or the navy perhaps?”

Mr. Armnaut thought for a while.

Anna, a little embarrassed, continued, "We thought that your uniform showed you to be in one of the armed services."

"Yes, I can see that you might think so. Do you have an army nearby?"

"Oh, do you mean barracks or a camp nearby?" Mrs. Cranford thought a moment, "The nearest is in Crickfield, some twenty miles away."

"How then do you protect yourselves?"

There was a puzzled silence.

"Well," said Anna, "we have our wardens. And there is a constable in the village."

Frances giggled, and said, "Old Barnett! He can barely protect his own garden from the ducks!"

"Now Frances, that is not polite to laugh at Mr. Barnett's frailty. You too will be old one day and not find it so amusing."

"You have no other defenses?"

"Well, apart from Pappa's guns, no," said Madeleine.

"Guns? Ah, these are a great interest of mine! May I see them?"

Mr. Armnaut became more animated that they had yet seen him.

"Mr. Armnaut," replied Mrs. Cranford, "my husband has them for hunting, not for display. I am sure you would not find much to interest you."

"It is a great interest—a hobby—of mine. I would be sad to think I had missed such an opportunity to see them."

"Really, Mr. Armnaut, they are not anything one would place in a collection, they are merely a set of working pieces for the hunt. But, perhaps Jenkins could let you see them, if it would give you pleasure."

"Yes, that would be agreeable."

Jenkins was summoned at the end of tea, and the guest was shown into the saddlery where the guns were stored.

Mr. Armnaut waited patiently while the old butler laid out the shotguns and one hunting-rifle on the table.

“Show me the projectiles.”

“Excuse me, Sir, the... projectiles?”

Mr. Armnaut frowned searching for a better word.

“Ah,” said the butler suddenly understanding, “the ammunition is here, Sir.”

He brought out several boxes of shotgun cartridges and a handful of the bullets for the rifle.

Mr. Armnaut turned a bullet over and over in his pale hand.

“To do much damage this must travel at high velocity.”

The butler did not understand, but stood and waited.

“Show me this weapon in operation.”

“Sir?”

The guest was becoming frustrated at the difficulty of speaking. He picked up the rifle and the bullet and held them towards the butler.

“Show me!”

Surprise crossed his old face but it was tempered with resignation at the strange ways his employers sometimes behaved, and the stranger people they sometimes brought in.

“Yes, Sir.”

He took the bullets and the rifle out into the garden.

“At what would Sir like me to shoot?”

“Anything!” He waved his pale hand in the general direction of the trees.

“One needs a target at which to shoot, Sir,” sighed the butler.

Mrs. Cranford approached from the open drawing-room doors.

“Mr. Armnaut, are you going to try it out? I do hope you’ll do no damage!”

“I wish to see it... work.”

“My, you are a strange man! I would have thought a military gentleman such as yourself would have seen plenty of rifles being used.”

“No, not like this.”

“Really, what civilized country is it that does not use such things?”

“I come from far away.”

“Excuse me madam,” said the butler.

“Yes, Jenkins?”

“The gentleman needs a target, Madam, before I can demonstrate the rifle.”

“Of course, fetch the archery target and set that up.”

“Madam.”

The butler walked into the house and left Mrs. Cranford with her guest.

“You are a most mysterious man, Mr. Armnaut. But you have charmed the hearts of my daughters.”

“You and your daughters are kind and generous. I thank you for allowing me to visit you.”

“You are most welcome. I hope you will come again.”

They were silent for moment; she turned to see if the butler was out of hearing.

“I must ask you one question, if I may, Mr. Armnaut.”

“Please.”

“Why do you travel alone? It seems that someone in business such as yourself, with such an interest in Natural Philosophy as to wish to examine our plants for their medicinal properties, would need a staff. Where are your servants? Surely you at least have a man-servant to carry your bags?”

“I have all I need.”

“Forgive me, for my persistence, Mr. Armnaut, but I cannot allow my daughters to continue their acquaintance with you if I cannot be sure you are truly a man of substance. I have no cause to disbelieve you when you say you have built a new house near our boundaries, but for such a thing to have happened without a whisper of it arriving here, seems to me to be most extraordinary.”

“It need not concern you. Send your maid. I’m sure she will report all is as I have told you.”

“Of course, please forgive my forthrightness. It is only the concern of a mother for her daughters.”

“I understand.”

The butler and another servant set up the target.

“Sir?” he said offering the loaded weapon to Mr. Armnaut.

“No, you continue, please.”

“Very well, Sir.”

The old butler put the rifle to his shoulder, aimed carefully and fired.

Mr. Armnaut was obviously astonished at the noise.

The butler extended his arm to invite the guest to inspect the target. When he did not move he said, “Would Sir like to see the target?”

“Yes, please.”

They both walked over. Mr. Armnaut examined the hole in the center of the target then walked round the back and examined the exit hole.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Sir?”

“I understand the weapon now. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sir.”

“Now show me the other weapon.”

Mr. Armnaut was not satisfied until he had seen a section of the archery target ripped off by a shotgun blast.

“And so, Mr. Armnaut, when we will have the pleasure of your company again?” asked Mrs. Cranford.

“Soon I hope. But I must attend to my work. I have much to do.”

“Of course, I hope you will not let my daughters become a bother to you, or distract you from your work.”

“No, they will be no trouble.”

The maid was not the same on her return from Mr. Armnaut’s house. She seemed less attentive than ever. Several times that next day she dropped things. Mrs.

Cranford awoke in the night convinced she had heard the girl scream.

Some days later, Frances was troubled at dinner, "Mamma, Mr. Armnaut has not been in the woods recently."

"I'm sure he is busy about his work, my dear."

"I hope he's alright."

Anna said, "Do you think we should visit him, in case he has fallen ill and no one is there to care for him?"

"Now girls, don't let your imaginations run wild. I'm sure there is nothing wrong with Mr. Armnaut's health, pale though he is."

"I'd like to visit him. Nelly says his house is very nice," Anna continued.

"Nelly is not herself," commented Madeleine.

"We know dear, I've asked Mr. Glendenning to see her."

Frances opened her eyes wide, "Mamma! How would it be if you came with us for a walk in the woods, and we found our way to Mr. Armnaut's house? Wouldn't that be wonderful? Even if he were not at home we would see where it is he lives."

Her mother smiled and thought a while.

"Perhaps it would. Perhaps it is time we saw for ourselves."

The table erupted with girlish cheers.

They set off early the next morning into the bluebell wood. Turning into the beech trees they made their way down the steep valley and across the small stream.

Mr. Armnaut's house was not what they had expected. It was covered with cut branches and clods of earth. Underneath the coverings they could glimpse walls polished like silver. The front door, too, was polished such that they could see their own reflections as they stood in silence before it.

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Cranford.

“Mamma,” said Anna, “this reminds me of Mr. Garranna’s house.”

“Yes dear, it is passing similar.”

“Who is Mr. Garranna, Mamma?” asked Frances.

“He was someone we met before you were born, Frances. He was not at all a gentleman.”

“Where did he live?”

“Well, for a while he lived on the bank of the south lake. But he isn’t there any longer.”

“You mean down where the grass doesn’t grow?”

“Yes dear, nothing has ever grown there since.”

“But, I thought you said he had a house?”

“It’s a little difficult to explain dear, but his house went away.”

“Mamma! I am not the silly girl you take me for. I know houses do not move!”

“It’s true Franny,” said Anna, “Mr. Garranna’s house moved. Not only that, but it flew.”

“Flew! But... how is it possible that a house should fly?”

Her mother replied, “We do not know how dear, all we know is that it did, and that Mr. Garranna was not a gentleman.”

“What did he do?”

“He stole several of our animals and all the fish from the South Lake.”

“He was a poacher?”

“Indeed it seemed so. Pappa received recompense from him, of course, but he would never admit to his wrongdoing.”

“Oh, I see... Oh, I see! That is where the machines in the barn came from!”

“That’s right dear, they originally belonged to Mr. Garranna.”

There was no reply when they knocked on Mr. Armut’s door, and they saw no sign of him in the woods that day.

The very next day was the strangest day in young

Franny's life. In the middle of the morning their guest returned, walking through their grounds. Instead of his red uniform he wore a burnished suit of brass.

"Mamma! Come and look!" she called from her window, "Mr. Armnaut is dressed as a knight!" She heard her mother downstairs calling for Jenkins.

The family gathered on the terrace to wait for him to cross the length of the lawn.

"Mr. Armnaut, this is an unexpected visit. I hope nothing is amiss."

"Thank you, all is well. But I must leave soon, and I came to say 'goodbye' and to ask one more favor."

"Oh, Mr. Armnaut, this is indeed sad news that you are to leave us, so soon! Of course we shall be glad to entertain any request you should have."

"Your cook. I need your cook. She must come with me."

"Marjory? Why would she need to accompany you?"

"She has the knowledge of the medication."

"Mr. Armnaut, please be more clear. Of what medication do you speak?"

"She knows the secrets of the medication you fed to me. You called it 'Bara Brith'."

The family laughed, perhaps a little unkindly.

"Oh Mr. Armnaut, I'm afraid you are mistaken, that cake is but a confection from Wales, it is not a medicine of any kind!"

"I have studied its properties. It will be a source of great revenue. She must accompany me to collect the constituents and instruct me in the means of manufacture."

The family was still laughing.

"Surrender the woman to me now!"

Mr. Armnaut was holding a silver wand in his hand. He pointed it at each of the girls in turn and finally at Mrs. Cranford. The laughter stopped.

"Mamma? What is it?" asked Franny.

"I do not know dear, but Mr. Armnaut seems to think we should be coerced by its brandishment."

"I'm scared, Mamma."

"I know dear, but don't be. I'm sure Mr. Armnaut doesn't really mean to harm us."

"I will do all that is necessary to acquire the woman and the medication."

"Well, Mr. Armnaut, this may be how you conduct your affairs in your own country, but here we value politeness, and you are proving to be a most impolite man. Now, please point your... weapon, if such it is, away from my daughters and I will call the cook."

"Agreed."

Mrs. Cranford moved to the door and called, "Girl! Fetch Marjory from the kitchen at once!"

There was a tense silence until the red-faced cook emerged onto the terrace.

"Ma'am." She curtseyed.

"Marjory, it seems your Bara Brith is very popular."

"Ooh, thank you Ma'am."

"This gentleman wants you to teach him how to make it."

The cook glanced at the strange figure in bright armor.

"Begg'n' your pardon Ma'am, but is this the same gentleman who addled poor young Nelly's head... meanin' no disrespect."

"I fear so, Marjory. I take it that you would rather not transfer from our service into his?"

"Oh Ma'am! I... wouldn't want to do that, no. I'm very happy workin' for you Ma'am. You've always done right by me and my Bert."

"And there, Mr. Armnaut, is your answer. Marjory will stay with us."

"No. She must come with me, now!"

He raised the weapon towards Mrs. Cranford again.

"I will destroy you all unless you comply!"

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Cranford.

"Oh Ma'am, don't you go gettin' yourself hurt on

my account!" said the cook. "Not you and the girls. If he's going to do any violence here I don't want it on my conscience. I'll go if I have to..."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Marjory, Jenkins has arrived."

From the terrace they could see, over the armored shoulder of Mr. Armnaut, that Jenkins had indeed arrived. He was sitting in a silver and blue carriage of polished metal. The carriage had no wheels and yet moved above the ground at a slow and steady pace.

"Oh!" whispered Frances, "Jenkins has brought one of the machines from the barn!"

"The cook will come with me now! There will be no more delay!" called Mr. Armnaut, unaware of what was happening behind him.

"I believe, rather, it is time for you to leave, Mr. Armnaut!" said Mrs. Cranford, loud enough for Jenkins to hear her over the hum of his wheel-less carriage.

"Send the cook down or die!" Mr. Armnaut was obviously very upset, his hand shaking as he turned a small wheel at the side of the weapon.

"Jenkins!" called Mrs. Cranford.

Mr. Armnaut half turned, just enough to see his danger, but Jenkins had already taken aim with the large gun mounted on the front of the carriage. Mr. Armnaut's armor, sufficient to withstand a bullet, even at close range, began to melt in the strange red glow that came from the gun. By the time the boiling and steaming had stopped, there was nothing to be found of Mr. Armnaut.

"Well done, Jenkins!" they called.

The butler nodded, waved and turned the wheel-less carriage round. He moved off at the same steady pace he had come, returning to the barn.

"Well, what an adventure we shall have to tell Pappa on his return!" said Frances.

“Yes dear, he will be happy that Mr. Garranna’s machinery has proven so useful again.”

Anna asked, “Mamma, what shall we do with Mr. Armnaut’s house?”

“Well dear, when your father returns, he will want to look at it, and make sure it presents no danger to us. Perhaps, given time, he and Jenkins may find what it can do. You know how he loves to tinker with such things. He had such happy days working on Mr. Garranna’s carriage; perhaps he may even get Mr. Armnaut’s house to fly!”

“Oh, Mamma! I hope so! What fun!”

“Oh yes Mamma, do let’s try!” said Madeleine.

“Now girls, it is not proper to get so excitable about such things that yet may not be. Your father will decide, after he has studied it.”

“Oh, I do hope he can,” said Frances.

The family went back into the house. The servants went back about their duties.

Frances said, “Pappa is right. Life is full of excitement and opportunities for learning, but I think the most exciting times are those when visitors come to tea.”