

news . . .

MISS B. (*sitting L.C. and taking a deep breath*). Then I must tell you, ladies, that Cranford is in the receipt of a most signal honour; an event, I may say, almost without precedence has occurred here in our midst. And on this occasion, feeling in need of leadership, I turn of course to dear Miss Jenkins . . . the daughter of our late rector and the centre, I think I may say, of our little society . . . (*She bows to Miss M.*)

MISS MATTY. Thank you, Miss Barker . . . but . . .

MISS B. And believe me, I am not unaware of the presumption which I . . . which I . . .

MISS POLE. Presume . . . ?

MISS B. I thank you, Miss Pole. I was about to say that I am conscious of the honour I have in being the first to communicate this intelligence to Miss Jenkins . . .

MISS MATTY (*sitting with Miss P. on sofa*). Let us waive formality, Miss Barker . . . and hear your news . . .

MISS B. Ladies! We have amongst us . . . in our humble, though genteel society, a visitor . . . a member of the peerage . . . !

(*She pauses for the expected gasp of surprise.*)

MISS POLE (*in an artificially casual tone, robs her at one stroke of her triumph*). Oh . . . ? You refer to Mrs. Jamieson's sister-in-law, I suppose?

MISS B. (*horribly crestfallen*). You know . . . ? You already know . . . about Lady Glenmire . . . ?

MISS POLE (*disgustingly superior*). Some such name as that: . . . I declare, I have almost forgot . . .

MISS B. (*pathetically*). Oh dear . . . and I hurried so . . . to be the first to tell you . . .

MISS MATTY (*kindly*). That was exceedingly considerate of you, Miss Barker, and I take it very kindly . . .

MISS B. And she will be here . . . ? Tomorrow? To tea?

MISS POLE. Naturally.

MISS B. I must admit that I am a little behind-hand these days in my knowledge of occurrences in high society . . . and I wondered if I might just glance at the latest copy of the

St. James's Chronicle . . . I know it is not my turn . . . but . . .

MISS MATTY. Certainly . . . Miss Pole has it at the moment . . . Miss POLE (*annoyed at being caught with it*). Why . . . so I have . . . I was just glancing at . . . (*She catches Miss MATTY's eye.*) Oh, well . . . the fact of the matter is that I cannot correctly recall the mode of addressing a Lady . . . so silly of me . . . just slipped my mind . . .

(*Miss P. hands the St. James's Chronicle to Miss B.*)

MISS B. (*taking the paper*). Now that . . . Miss Matty, is my own predicament. I was sure that you could help me, being, as everybody knows, a connection of Sir Peter and Lady Arley . . .

MISS POLE. It is really a question of whether one says, *My Lady* instead of *Ma'am* . . .

(*Miss BARKER studies the paper.*)

MARY. Or one might say "Good afternoon, Lady Glenmire". MISS MATTY. Why, so indeed one might . . . How clever of you, dear, to think of it . . .

MISS POLE. Or, "Good afternoon, Your Ladyship".

MISS MATTY (*to MARY*). My dear, if they fix on that you must let me practise a little on you first.

MISS B. (*looking up from Chronicle*). Dear Queen Adelaide appeared in a turban . . . Hmm—

MISS MATTY (*longingly*). Yes . . . sea-green . . .

MARY. But most unsuitable for Cranford . . .

MISS MATTY. Oh . . . of course . . . almost vulgar . . .

MISS POLE. Naturally . . .

MISS B. Just what I was about to say . . .

MISS MATTY. I am afraid the Chronicle is no help in the matter of addressing the nobility. We were thinking, when you arrived, Miss Barker, of inquiring of Mrs. Forrester . . .

MISS POLE. Whose father was a soldier . . .

MISS MATTY. And fought against Napoleon . . . (*She delivers this triumphantly as if that settled the matter.*)

MISS B. Of course . . . And we can never forget that she was born a Tyrrell . . . and is allied to the Bigges, of Bigelow Hall . . .