

with Martha... is it not kind of her...?

MISS POLE (*impatient at being side-tracked*). Yes, yes, indeed, very kind and I have already greeted her and inquired after her father who is very well though he has rather unfortunate views about the railway... But now... what do you think...?

MISS MATTY (*crossing to MARY, quite genuinely distressed*). You must excuse me, Miss Pole... But Mary is still wearing her cape and bonnet—how rude of me. What can I have been thinking about... Martha!

(*Enter MARTHA D.R.*)

Here is Miss Mary's cape and bonnet... take them to her room and lay them carefully on the bed...

(*Exit MARTHA. MISS MATTY seats herself to R. of MISS POLE... she adopts an expectant expression and waits for the news.*)

MISS POLE (*rising. She has waited for the audience*). Well, what do you think...? As I was just about to tell Mary, here, I had occasion to pop into Mr. Johnson's shop to match some ribbons... and there was Miss Battie...

MISS MATTY. Yes...?

MISS POLE... who had heard it straight... well, almost straight, from Mr. Mulliner...

MISS MATTY (*to MARY*). Mr. Mulliner is the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson's butler...

MISS POLE... so it must be true.

MARY (*sitting on chair L.C.*). Dear Miss Pole, please tell us... Miss Pole (*after a suitable pause to increase the suspense*). Well...

... yesterday... by the noon train... came a visitor to Cranford... a guest of Mrs. Jamieson... a lady...

MISS MATTY (*eagerly*). Yes...? A lady...?

MISS POLE. Indeed, a lady... in fact none other than the widow of the late Earl of Glenmire... The Countess of Glenmire herself...!

(*She stands back to savour her triumph... which is indeed great, for both Miss M. and MARY are properly astonished.*)

MISS MATTY. The Countess of Glenmire...!

MARY. Lady Glenmire...!

MISS MATTY. Have you seen her? What does she look like...? Miss POLE (*rather vexed at being asked a question she cannot answer*). Look like...? Well... as to that... I didn't think to ask...

(*At this moment MARTHA has descended the stairs again and has overheard the last words. She moves D.R. listening.*) But there is no doubt that Lady Glenmire would appear very distinguished...

MISS MATTY. I have never seen a countess.

MARTHA (*unnoticed till now*). Is it the lady that's staying with Mrs. Jamieson, you mean...?

(*They turn on her in unison.*)

MISS MATTY. Oh... er, Martha...

MARTHA (*pausing with one hand on kitchen door*). Yes, m'am?...

MISS MATTY. You understand I cannot encourage gossip about the ladies of Cranford... but I was just wondering if you happened to notice...

MARTHA. What, m'am?

MISS POLE. This lady with the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson, now... You saw her quite clearly...?

MARTHA. Clear enough.

MISS MATTY. A very distinguished lady, no doubt...?

MARTHA. Put me in mind a bit of Mrs. Deacon, her at the Coach and Horses.

MISS MATTY. Hush, Martha! That's not respectful.

MARTHA. Isn't it, m'am... I beg pardon.

(*Exit MARTHA. MISS POLE sits on L. of MISS M.*)

MISS POLE (*exasperated*). I declare! The ignorance of the lower classes...!

MISS MATTY. Well, I suppose we shall all see her sooner or later.

MISS POLE. Sooner or later! Tomorrow!

MISS MATTY. Indeed? And does Mrs. Jamieson give a party?

MISS POLE. Not that I know of... but tomorrow is Thursday, is it not, and that is the day of your party...

MISS MATTY. My party... Oh, my goodness! But I did not ask Lady Glenmire, I did not know she was here.

MARY. But do you give a party tomorrow, Miss Matty?