

heart, and what more would a body like me be asking?

MR. H. (*pating her hand*). Thank you, ma'am. (*He turns to the assembly.*) And if Miss Matty should consider the tea trade I will be very happy to communicate with the East India Company for her and give her the best of my advice on the subject...

MARY (*rising*). Thank you very much, Mr. Hoggins... I think your idea about tea is excessively good...

MR. H. Then good morning to you, ladies...

MRS. H. (*as they move to the door*). And give poor Miss Matty my love and tell her not to fash herself for she has naught but friends in Cranford...

(MR. and MRS. HOGGINS go out.)

MISS POLE (*rising and rapping the table again*). Ladies, I think we may now bring our meeting to an end...

MRS. F. Poor Mrs. Hoggins... I fear she will be considered a social outcast...

MISS B. I was afraid Mrs. Jamieson might see it in this light...

MISS POLE (*rapping very hard*). We are not assembled, ladies, to discuss Mrs. Hoggins and Mrs. Jamieson... I was about to say that—(*She glances again at the notes*) that we, the ladies... and one gentleman now departed... of Cranford, in this room assembled, have resolved upon aiding our dear friend, Miss Matilda Jenkyns, to the best of our ability. To this resolution we would like to add that it is our earnest wish that Miss Matty may never learn that we have in any way aided her... or that she is under any obligation to us... MRS. F. She means it must be a secret, Mary... Just tell the lawyer about it and ask him to give her the money as if it were her own income...

MISS POLE. Thank you, Mrs. Forrester. Then I think I may declare the meeting closed...

(*They all rise and Miss POLE collects the pencils and puts them back in her bag.*)

MRS. F. Just say we called, Mary... and left our love...

(*The doorbell rings... MARY goes to open it.*)

MISS POLE. That must be Mrs. Jamieson...

MISS B. Oh dear...

MISS POLE. Remember, ladies, no mention of Mrs. Hoggins. MRS. F. Certainly not...

MISS B. Not for the world...!

MRS. J. (*off*). Good morning, Mary... (*Entering.*) Good morning, ladies...

(MARY follows her c.)

MISS B. (*unctuously as ever*). Good morning, Mrs. Jamieson, I hope we see you well, and that your sojourn in Cheltenham was of benefit to your health...?

MRS. J. I found Cheltenham very pleasant... and I think I may say that I am in good health...

MISS B. I am most gratified to hear it, ma'am...

MARY. Pray sit down, Mrs. Jamieson...

MRS. J. (*enthroning herself at chair C. above table C.*). Thank you. (*All sit.*) I may add, ladies, that I am deeply surprised and

shocked at the news I have received since my return to Cranford. It should not have been permitted to happen... MRS. F. But they did it in London, ma'am... they were already married when they came back to Cranford...

MRS. J. (*withering her with a frightful glare*). I refer, madam, to the sad condition of Miss Matilda Jenkyns...

MRS. F. (*flustered*). Oh... I thought you meant Mr. Hoggins. MRS. J. Hoggins was a name for which I never cared. It is now a name which I have forgotten... you comprehend me?

MRS. F. Oh yes, ma'am... I'm truly sorry... I...

MRS. J. The subject is closed.

MISS POLE. I have acquainted these ladies, ma'am, with the suggestion that Miss Matty might consider being an agent for the East India Tea Company.

MISS B. But I am sure, ma'am, that Miss Jenkyns would not dream of opening a shop without first consulting you, as the leader of society, upon the propriety of such a move... MRS. J. I promised Miss Pole I would consider the matter, and accordingly I am now come to give you my decision. MISS POLE. You understand, of course, that a shop window would not be necessary...