

## Cheering Up Mrs. Crofts

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*"The only time I ever really suffered in body or mind, the only time that I ever fancied myself unwell, or had any ideas of danger, was the winter that I passed by myself at Deal, when the Admiral (Captain Croft then) was in [the Mediterranean]. I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should hear from him next..."*

—Knock, knock! It is just little I, popping in to say hello, dear Mrs. Crofts! No, *pray* do not get up—I'll just let myself in! It is *so* good to see you again, my *dear* Mrs. Crofts; for although I spotted you at church this morning and *waved*—not *during* the sermon, of course, for that would not have been *proper*, but *after* the service, as we filed out to shake hands with dear Mr. Brown; yes, indeed, I waved my handkerchief to you *several times*; not *this* one, which I use for everyday, but my good one trimmed with lace for Sundays—but although I *waved*, as I said, you must not have seen me, for you appeared to be walking away to your rooms *quite quickly*!

—I am delighted to have made your acquaintance, for I know *so few people* here! As you know, my dear niece Jane's *particular friend*, Mrs. Dixon, and her husband are in Highbury now on a long visit. And not a day after they arrived, Mr. Dixon very kindly made me a present of a *long holiday* at a sea-side resort—he said that I would *benefit* by a change and that they would take *good care* of Jane and her grandmother. I was *not to think* of returning until they were about to depart. To be sure it would have been a little more pleasant at the sea-side in the *summer* than in the *winter*, but he would not take *no* for an answer, can you imagine?

—*Tea?* Why, how kind of you; yes, yes, just a wee drop, if you please. *The cup that cheers!* Though it is not really the *cup* that is cheerful, charming though this tea service is, but the *tea* itself, which is rather confusing, is it not?....No, no, *pray* let you stay seated; let *me* just jump up to take the cup from your hand! —Oh!....Gracious me!....I am afraid that I *joggled* your arm, dear Mrs. Crofts.... And tea stains are *so difficult* to get out of white muslin, scrub you never so hard with a handkerchief! Now, *do not despair!*—I believe that if you put *salt* on the stain....no, stay, is it *vinegar*?...I do not perfectly recollect....Dear Mrs. Elton claims for salt, I believe, while dear Mrs. Knightley (who used to be Miss Woodhouse) holds out for vinegar...or perhaps one is to alternate salt and vinegar; or is it the vinegar first and then the salt?—Never you mind! I shall write to *both* Mrs. Elton and Mrs. Knightley to obtain the answer! And, even if the stain *persists*, which I trust that it may not, you may always find a use for the rest of the muslin in your gown; muslin can never be said to be gone to waste, for one can always be cutting it up for a handkerchief or an apron or a cap or some such thing. Dear Papa always said to me: Jane, he said, Jane, dear (for so he always called me)—*do not let your scraps of muslin go to waste!*

—Ah, my dear, you cover your eyes with your hand!—I am persuaded that you have the *head-ache*. I know that my dear Mama often complains of the head-ache and dear niece Jane as well—no, no, I am mistook: Jane suffers from the sore throat but not the head-ache. It is much the same, though, I believe. Perhaps it is the glare from the sun that is *troubling you*; to be sure it is the first sun we've seen these four weeks, so cold and *dreary* it has been no matter what they say about the healthful properties of the seaside, and the nights *drawing in* so fast—as of course they must, it being mid-winter, not high summer.

—But I am persuaded, as I said, that this glare is *too much* for you—here, let me draw the curtains. No, no, it is *no trouble at all*, I assure you! Nay, I insist! *There!* Nice and dim to protect your poor eyes. And this will also protect the carpet, not that that need concern you, my dear, since these are but rented rooms—and though your good Mrs. Sharpe keeps them clean, they are *none too home-like*, are they? *None* of those dainty little touches that give comfort and cheer and the walls quite a *dreary* puce color which I always think is trying even for a fresh young complexion such as you *was used* to have. And, besides, the strong sun coming in—strong for the time of the year, I should say, for it is *nothing* at all like the bright light of June—might fade the carpet and you would perforce have to place newspaper down to protect it each time the sun moved which I am *persuaded* you would not care to do, my dear Mrs. Crofts, especially during your...(Hush! I will lower my voice even though there is no one else nearby to hear!)...*your recovery* from your late and unsatisfactory *delicate condition*. And I must now convey to you my sorrow at your *untimely loss*—it is a *mercy*, I suppose, that your Captain has not yet heard of your *Blasted Hopes*, wanting a son as he must, for all the gentlemen do; though if they were not eventually satisfied with their daughters, what would become of us all?

—*You sigh!* Alas, you poor dear! Let me think of other news to take your mind off your present sorrow....Your excellent Captain: is he still serving off the coast of Persia?...Yes?...I trust that all is well and that he will return to you with all his *limbs intact* not to mention his *senses*, for I understand that some gentlemen return from battle quite *hideously scarred* and *maimed for life* and turned of a *terrible temperament*, so that their unhappy wives must nurse them, *the poor hopeless wrecks*, to the end of their days. And, of course, it is always the *saddest* of invalids who lives the *longest*, which makes for *such difficulties* if one is subsisting on a small annuity or a diminishing naval pension, and goodness knows whether the present Government will in fact allow for the *proper pensions* for those officers who risk their lives and also their complexions—for I believe I have never yet seen a Naval officer whose complexion was not a *nasty yellow!* It is to be wondered at that the *Army* officers do not turn this strange color which is so unpleasant to see, but perhaps it is because their occupation is on good, safe, dry land, not cooped up a *thousand miles from anywhere* in a *wretched, dirty ship* with victuals that go bad and very little water to drink, not that I believe the Navy *drinks* water for I think it is grog

that they are served, and one hopes that they do not all become *hopelessly addicted* to the bottle, as *so often* happens—Oh, dear, where was I?....

—Well, well; yes, yes, to be sure; let me think of something else of to brighten your spirits—well, let me tell you that I have heard recently that the streets of Persia are filled with...with *houris*...which I believe to be *exquisitely beautiful ladies* without the proper number of *petticoats*, not to mention *stays*—not that a gentlemen would *mention* stays, but it is to be hoped that your husband will not find his *fancy straying*—Oh! What *do* I say! Of *course* his heart will remain true, even though I must say *sotto voce* and *below my breath* between us good friends that you are looking *sadly pulled*, my dear Mrs. Crofts—*not* the blooming young woman whom I met when I first arrived here. It is a shame that the bad weather and your unsatisfactory condition have made it impossible for you to get any healthful exercise, for indeed your cheeks are pale and you seem frequently disposed to tears.

—Yes, there is your handkerchief at your poor eyes again! But perhaps it is the smoke, for this fire is *sadly* smoky. Here, let me stir it up—Dear Mama says that I can make the brightest fire out of just a few twigs and sticks....Oh, dear!....Ahem!....Such a lot of smoke!....Ahem, ahem!....You are coughing, too, dear Mrs. Crofts; here, let me put another little log on, and, perhaps....Ahem!...Oh, dear, I do believe that the fire has gone out!....Well, never mind! I am *quite warm* here with my pelisse and my extra petticoat, made of flannel; I always wear flannel next to the skin and recommend that you do so as well, for one can never be *too careful* about infection, especially in the winter months; and wouldn't it be *dreadful* if you were to be carried away with a *putrid sore throat* just before your gallant husband returns from sea?

—You look around, Mrs. Crofts—are you expecting another visitor? No? Well, then, I am happy to say that I have *quite another hour* to spend with you. What are friends for, but to spend time together when you might otherwise be solitary and forced to read an improving book, such as Fordyce's *Sermons*, for I am sure that a gentlewoman such as you would have no interest in one of these shocking modern novels, even the ones that are said to be written by A Lady! Though I have never opened the pages of such a novel, I understand that reading *does* help to pass the time, and I know your *acquaintance* in this town is *not great*. It is also a *sad lack*, is it not, that there is no circulating library nor any Assemblies nor indeed any concerts here in the winter months to entertain us? I am *quite surprised*, for I had previously heard of sea-side towns as being positively *giddy* with amusements and visitors to *quiz* and elegant persons to make the acquaintance of—not that elegant persons would give *me* a second glance, for I am not as well known here in this town as I am in *dear Highbury*—but still it would be pleasant to observe some ladies and gentlemen of fashion, to take hints of dress sleeves and flounces back to Mama and dear Jane. But without these amusements we must perforce be thrown back upon *our friends*.

—Well, my dear, you must not let me rattle on so. Dear Papa used to say that I was a *regular little bagpipe*, chattering on and on regardless of the topic, though how he comprehended this I do not perfectly understand, as he spent most of the day working at his sermons in the library, except when he was calling for his nuncheon, or his dinner, or his tea, or his claret to be brought him. But now I must take my leave of you, for I must go look at a pair of gloves at Foster's....Foster carries very nice gloves indeed; but they are very expensive, so that I must *consider carefully* before I make my purchase, for gloves are *not* like muslin, you know; so I will visit him every day for several weeks until I make up my mind; and I will be sure to let you know of what I decide....Gracious! Listen to that wind sougning in the eaves!....A *mournful* sound, I always think—Does it not sound to you like someone crying? A babe, perhaps, or a cat....Oh, take no alarm, Mrs. Crofts!—not a *large* cat, indeed! No, no, a small one, a tabby merely: quite harmless, I'm sure....Here, let me but check my bonnet in your glass before I run away on my *little errands*....No, no, Mrs. Crofts, *pray* do not touch those curtains, I *insist*! For I am *quite certain* that you have the head-ache! Do but lie down upon the sofa and I will just tip-toe all *creep-mouse* to the door and let myself out without any further ado....Not another word from *me*, I assure you!....Now, where are my gloves?....Did I put them in my reticule or are they on this table?... To be sure I meant to place them in my reticule as soon as I took them off, lest I mislay them. 'Put your gloves in your reticule, Jane, or on the table next you, just as soon as you remove them!' And so I told myself when I came in....Well, *goodness*! if I was not sitting upon them the whole time. *Most* remarkable! Oh, but I should be whispering as your eyes are closed and now perhaps you can get some rest at long last....*Hush!* I will bid you good day, my dear...I will quietly close the door and be on my *merry way*....

—Oh, I just *had* to pop my head back in to—Why, Mrs. Crofts, I thought you were to *rest* and not try to open those curtains again, for the sun is still too bright! There, that's right. Here is a shawl for your feet....No other little service that I can do for you today?....Now, what was it that I wished to mention to you? It was not about the gloves, no, nor about the weather—Ah! I have quite remembered. Fancy!—it is just another month before the Captain is to return to us again! Only four short weeks! How *shall* we pass the time! But fear not! —I will be sure to stop in to visit you again tomorrow, dear Mrs. Crofts, to *cheer you up!*