

January Points to Ponder *Wives and Daughters* Chs 21-30

1 EG is poking gentle fun here at Mrs Gibson's pretensions – what does this passage say about social class and social mores?

"After Easter, Molly and I shall know how to behave at a card-party, but not before," said Cynthia, demurely.

"You're always fond of your quips and your cranks, my dear," said Miss Browning, "and I wouldn't quite answer for your behaviour: you sometimes let your spirits carry you away. But I'm quite sure Molly will be a little lady as she always is, and always was, and I have known her from a babe."

Mrs. Gibson took up arms on behalf of her own daughter, or, rather, she took up arms against Molly's praises.

"I don't think you would have called Molly a lady the other day, Miss Browning, if you had found her where I did: sitting up in a cherry-tree, six feet from the ground at least, I do assure you."

"Oh! but that wasn't pretty," said Miss Browning, shaking her head at Molly. "I thought you'd left off those tom-boy ways."

"She wants the refinement which good society gives in several ways," said Mrs. Gibson, returning to the attack on poor Molly. "She's very apt to come upstairs two steps at a time."

"Only two, Molly!" said Cynthia. "Why, to-day I found I could manage four of these broad shallow steps."

"My dear child, what are you saying?"

"Only confessing that I, like Molly, want the refinements which good society gives; therefore, please do let us go to Miss Brownings' this evening. I will pledge myself for Molly that she shan't sit in a cherry-tree; and Molly shall see that I don't go upstairs in an unladylike way. I will go upstairs as meekly as if I were a come-out young lady, and had been to the Easter ball."

2 Remembering the ideas EG conveyed to Herbert Grey about details and feelings in the first session, study the passage below and consider how EG conveys the feelings of her characters through the detailed description of refreshments at the Brownings? Why does Molly feel 'uneasy'?

He made a face of dismay, and then went off to his duties. The short conversation had been very pleasant, and his manner had had just the brotherly kindness of old times; but it was not quite the manner he had to Cynthia; and Molly half thought she would have preferred the latter. He was now hovering about Cynthia, who had declined the offer of refreshments from Willie Orford. Roger was tempting her, and with playful entreaties urging her to take some thing from him. Every word they said could be heard by the whole room; yet every word was

said, on Roger's part at least, as if he could not have spoken it in that peculiar manner to any one else. At length, and rather more because she was weary of being entreated, than because it was his wish, Cynthia took a macaroon, and Roger seemed as happy as though she had crowned him with flowers. The whole affair was as trifling and commonplace as could be in itself; hardly worth noticing; and yet Molly did notice it, and felt uneasy; she could not tell why.

3 How does Mrs Hamley's death affect the narrative? Ch. 22

4 EG uses the incident of the watch to cast light on the characters of Osborne Hamley and his father. What do we learn from this interchange?

The clock had stopped, no one had remembered to wind it up, but by the squire's watch it was already past dinner-time. The old butler put his head into the room, but, seeing the squire alone, he was about to draw it back, and wait for Mr. Osborne, before announcing dinner. He had hoped to do this unperceived, but the squire caught him in the act.

"Why isn't dinner ready?" he called out sharply. "It's ten minutes past six. And, pray, why are you using this wood? It's impossible to get oneself warm by such a fire as this." ... "It surely isn't six o'clock?" said Osborne, pulling out his dainty little watch. He was scarcely more unaware than it of the storm that was brewing.

"Six o'clock! It's more than a quarter past," growled out his father.

"I fancy your watch must be wrong, sir. I set mine by the Horse Guards only two days ago."

Now, impugning that old steady, turnip-shaped watch of the Squire's was one of the insults which, as it could not reasonably be resented, was not to be forgiven. That watch had been given him by his father when watches were watches long ago. It had given the law to house-clocks, stable-clocks, kitchen-clocks—nay, even to Hamley Church clock in its day; and was it now, in its respectable old age, to be looked down upon by a little whipper-snapper of a French watch which could go into a man's waistcoat pocket, instead of having to be extricated, with due effort, like a respectable watch of size and position, from a fob in the waistband? No! not if the whipper-snapper were backed by all the Horse Guards that ever were, with the Life Guards to boot. Poor Osborne might have known better than to cast this slur on his father's flesh and blood; for so dear did he hold his watch!

"My watch is like myself," said the squire, 'girling,' as the Scotch say—"plain, but steady-going. At any rate, it gives the law in my house. The King may go by the Horse Guards if he likes."

5 In the passage below Osborne reflects on his father and the problems of his secret marriage. Why might Squire Hamley have these views? What does this say about the Squire? Ch. 23.

I can't bear to compare our dinners here, overloaded with joints and game and sweets, as Morgan will persist in sending them up, with Aimée's two little mutton-chops. Yet what

would my father say if he knew I'd married a Frenchwoman? In his present mood he'd disinherit me, if that is possible; and he'd speak about her in a way I couldn't stand. A Roman Catholic, too! Well, I don't repent it. I'd do it again. ...

And then he considered that if Aimée had had the unspeakable, the incomparable blessing of being born of English parents, in the very heart of England—Warwickshire, for instance—and had never heard of priests, or mass, or confession, or the Pope, or Guy Fawkes, but had been born, baptized, and bred in the Church of England, without having ever seen the outside of a dissenting meeting-house, or a papist chapel—even with all these advantages, her having been a (what was the equivalent for "bonne" in English? 'nursery-governess' was a term hardly invented) nursery-maid, with wages paid down once a quarter, liable to be dismissed at a month's warning...

6 There are some significant social comment here and some very subtle criticism. What is EG highlighting in this passage and how is she doing it?

"How could you talk such nonsense, Cynthia!" said Mrs. Gibson, as the girls followed her upstairs. "You know you are not a dunce. It is all very well **not to be a blue-stocking, because gentle-people don't like that kind of woman;** but running yourself down, **and contradicting all I said about** your liking for Byron, and poets and poetry—to Osborne Hamley of all men, too!"

Mrs. Gibson **spoke quite crossly for her.**

"But, mamma," Cynthia replied, "I am either a dunce, or I am not. If I am, I did right to own it; **if I am not, he's a dunce if he doesn't find out I was joking.**"

7 What is the importance of the Easter Ball? What is funny/satirical about EG's presentation of this ball? What does this event say about class?

8 What comparisons can be drawn between this section and parts of Cranford?

9 Ch. 30 has the title 'Old ways and New Ways'. How far is this novel a portrayal of the progress of modernity? How does EG present this idea and is there evidence that she supports old or new?

10 This section ends with Mr Preston's move to Hollingford and his brush with the Squire. What are our impressions of Preston at this stage and what does his character add to the narrative?