

Points to Ponder W&D February 2023

1 Chapter 31 begins with a long discussion on party politics. Why does EG introduce this discussion at this point in the story and what does it add to our understanding of plot and character?

2 How far do you believe this statement by the Squire? Could he have avoided this situation?

The Squire had felt Mr. Preston's speech about the dismissal of his work-people very keenly; it fell in with the reproaches of his own conscience, though, as he would repeat to Roger over and over again,— "I couldn't help it—how could I?—I was drained dry of ready money—I wish the land was drained as dry as I am,

3 What does this exchange show about the characters of Lady H. and Mrs Gibson.?

"That's right, dear Lady Harriet! you can't think what a pleasure it is to me to welcome you at my own fireside, into my humble home."

"Humble! now, Clare, that's a little bit of nonsense, begging your pardon. I don't call this pretty little drawing-room a bit of a 'humble home.' It's as full of comforts, and of pretty things too, as any room of its size can be."

"Ah! how small you must feel it! even I had to reconcile myself to it at first."

"Well! perhaps your schoolroom was larger, but remember how bare it was, how empty of anything but deal tables, and forms, and mats. Oh, indeed, Clare, I quite agree with mamma, who always says you have done very well for yourself; and Mr. Gibson too! What an agreeable, well-informed man!"

"Yes, he is," said his wife, slowly, as if she did not like to relinquish her role of a victim to circumstances quite immediately. "He is very agreeable, very; only we see so little of him; and of course he comes home tired and hungry, and not inclined to talk to his own family, and apt to go to sleep."

"Come, come!" said Lady Harriet, "I'm going to have my turn now. We've had the complaint of a doctor's wife, now hear the moans of a peer's daughter. Our house is so overrun with visitors! and literally to-day I have come to you for a little solitude."

"Solitude!" exclaimed Mrs. Gibson. "Would you rather be alone?" slightly aggrieved.

"No, you dear silly woman; my solitude requires a listener, to whom I may say, 'How sweet is solitude!' But I am tired of the responsibility of entertaining. Papa is so open-hearted, he asks every friend he meets with to come and pay us a visit. Mamma is really a great invalid, but she does not choose to give up her reputation for good health, having always considered illness a want of self-control. So she gets wearied and worried by a crowd of people who are all of them open-mouthed for amusement of some kind; just like a brood of fledglings in a nest; so I have to be parent-bird, and pop morsels into their yellow leathery bills, to find them swallowed down before I can think of where to find the next. Oh, it's 'entertaining' in the largest, literalist, dreariest sense of the word. So I have told a few lies this morning, and come off here for quietness and the comfort of complaining!"

After a pause Lady Harriet started up and said—"I used to take you as my arbiter of morals when I was a little girl. Tell me, do you think it wrong to tell lies?"

4. What role do you think Lady H. plays in this text? Why do you think EG uses these comparisons between the Hamleys and the Cumnors-what do they add to our understanding of the text? What is EG saying about past and present, old and new?

5 How far do you feel that the middle sections of this novel is overly extended to fit the demands of serialised stories?

6 Ch 33 sees Dr G's misgivings about Roger's. Why might Dr G. 'not quite like it'?

"Yes!" said the Squire; "and they're not going to let the grass grow under his feet. He's to be off as soon as he can get his scientific traps ready. I almost wish he wasn't to go. You don't seem quite to like it, doctor?"

"Yes, I do," said Mr. Gibson in a more cheerful tone than before. "It can't be helped now without doing a mischief," thought he to himself.

7 What do Roger's thoughts about Cynthia tell us about her character and their relationship?

It was very bad, this going away, and wishing her good-by for two long years; and he wondered much during his ride how far he should be justified in telling her mother, perhaps in telling her own sweet self, what his feelings were without expecting, nay, indeed reprobating, any answer on her part. Then she would know at any rate how dearly she was beloved by one who was absent; how in all difficulties or dangers the thought of her would be a polar star, high up in the heavens, and so on, and so on; for with all a lover's quickness of imagination and triteness of fancy, he called her a star, a flower, a nymph, a witch, an angel, or a mermaid, a nightingale, a siren, as one or another of her attributes rose up before him.

8 Why is Lady H not impressed with Cynthia and why is this important?

Cynthia now joined the party, pretty and elegant as she always was; but somehow she did not take Lady Harriet's fancy; she only noticed her on account of her being her mother's daughter.

9 What is the importance of this conversation between Dr and Mrs G and how does EG make this funny? The conversation begins about one and a half pages into Ch 35-the start is copied below:

"Who told you that about Osborne?" said he, facing round upon her, and frightening her with his sudden sternness of voice and manner. It seemed as if absolute fire came out of his long dark sombre eyes. "Who told you, I say?"

She made a faint rally back into her former playfulness.

"Why? can you deny it? Is it not the truth?"

"I ask you again, Hyacinth, who told you that Osborne Hamley's life is in more danger than mine—or yours?"

"Oh, don't speak in that frightening way. My life is not in danger, I'm sure; nor yours either, love, I hope."

He gave an impatient movement, and knocked a wine-glass off the table. For the moment she felt grateful for the diversion, and busied herself in picking up the fragments: "bits of glass were so dangerous," she said. But she was startled by a voice of command, such as she had never yet heard from her husband.

"Never mind the glass. I ask you again, Hyacinth, who told you anything about Osborne Hamley's state of health?"

"I am sure I wish no harm to him, and I daresay he is in very good health, as you say," whispered she, at last.

"Who told—?" began he again, sterner than ever....

10 What is implied in the exchange below and why is it important to the story?

Nothing, dear, dear papa—nothing now. It is such a comfort to have you all to myself—it makes me happy."

Mr. Gibson knew all implied in these words, and felt that there was no effectual help for the state of things which had arisen from his own act. It was better for them both that they should not speak out more fully.

11 What does the Mr Coxe incident add to the story? Is it necessary?

12 Why does EG treat Molly's relationship with Roger with such sentimentality- the end of Chapter 37 particularly?

13 What reminds you of Cranford and what of Jane Austen in this section?

14 What interest does the projected London visit add to the story?

15 You, at any rate, have been a new delight to me—a sister; and I never knew how charming such a relationship could be." Why do you feel Molly accepts Cynthia so unconditionally?

Ch 31

Mr. Preston was not a man in whose breast such prejudices would die away. They were an excitement to him for one thing, and called out all his talent for intrigue on behalf of the party to which he was allied.

Mrs. Gibson was constantly making projects for throwing Roger and Cynthia together, that Molly chafed at the net spread so evidently, and at Roger's blindness in coming so willingly to be entrapped.

The Squire had felt Mr. Preston's speech about the dismissal of his work-people very keenly... as he would repeat to Roger—"I couldn't help it—how could I?—I was drained dry of ready money—I wish the land was drained as dry as I am.

The things prescribed were what she would naturally have done; but because they were prescribed—by implication only, it is true—Molly would have resisted; have gone out, for instance, when she was expected to stay at home.;

"Roger, you're the providence of the family," exclaimed Osborne, suddenly struck by admiration at his brother's conduct, and forgetting to contrast it with his own.

Ch 32

Cynthia missed her slave, although she did not care for Roger one thousandth part of what he did for her; yet she had found it not unpleasant to have a man whom she respected, and whom men in general respected, the subject of her eye.

Cynthia's love was the moon Roger yearned for; and Molly saw that it was far away and out of reach, else would she have strained her heart-cords to give it to Roger.

Cynthia did not love Roger. Molly could have cried with passionate regret at the thought of the unvalued treasure lying at Cynthia's feet.

We've had the complaint of a doctor's wife, now hear the moans of a peer's daughter. Our house is so overrun with visitors! and literally to-day I have come to you for a little solitude."

Lady Harriet had evidently taken for her step-daughter, and she contrived to place quiet obstacles in the way of a too frequent intercourse between the two.

Lady Harriet! I would not like her to think we made any difference in our meals because she stayed. But still you could put out the best service, and arrange some flowers, and ask cook what there is for dinner that she could send us for lunch

Lady Harriet sat down in a little low chair with her feet on the fender. This fender was strictly tabooed to all household and plebeian feet; indeed the position, if they assumed it, was considered low-bred and vulgar.

Cynthia now joined the party, pretty and elegant as she always was; but somehow she did not take Lady Harriet's fancy; she only noticed her on account of her being her mother's daughter.

So Mrs. Gibson, after all her precautions, had to submit to Lady Harriet's leaving her half-an-hour earlier than she otherwise would have done in order to "make herself common" (as Mrs. Gibson expressed it) by calling on the Miss Brownings.

Molly made herself uncomfortable with questioning herself as to how far it was right to leave unnoticed the small domestic failings—the webs, the distortions of truth which had prevailed in their household since her father's second marriage.

Ch 33

The country surgeon felt the beauty of the seasons perhaps more than most men. He saw more of it by day, by night, in storm and sunshine, or in the still, soft, cloudy weather.

Ch 34

There, bathed in the almost level rays of the autumn sunlight, lay the landscape she had known and loved from childhood; as quiet, as full of low humming life as it had been at this hour for many generations.

Ch 35

Dr Gibson to his wife:

"Well! you overheard our conversation, I suppose?"

"Not much," she answered eagerly, almost relieved by being thus helped out in her forced confession. "Only a sentence or two."

I only wish it were Molly's good fortune to meet with such another[as Roger]."

"I will try for her; I will indeed," said Mrs. Gibson, relieved by his change of tone.

"No, don't. That's one thing I forbid. I'll have no 'trying' for Molly."

Mr. Gibson had been compelled to face and acknowledge the fact, that the wife he had chosen had a very different standard of conduct from that which he had upheld all his life, and had hoped to have seen inculcated in his daughter.

Madam your wife and I didn't hit it off the only time I ever saw her. I won't say she was silly, but I think one of us was silly, and it wasn't me.

She liked Osborne extremely, much better than Roger; and would gladly have schemed to secure him for Cynthia, if she had not shrunk from the notion of her daughter's becoming a widow.

CH 36

"I am not sure that I shall go," put in Mrs. Gibson. She did not know why she said it, for she fully intended to go all the time; but having said it, she was bound to stick to it for a little while.

Ch 37

Cynthia put on all her pretty airs—her look of intent interest in what any one was saying to her; her unspoken deference; in short, all the unconscious ways she possessed by instinct of tickling the vanity of men.

Cynthia to Molly: I'm sure that Mr. Coxe came here with the intention of falling in love with you. I'm sure you saw it as plainly as I did, only you made yourself disagreeable, and I took pity on him, and consoled his wounded vanity."

She wakened up in the morning with a dull sense of something being wrong; the world was out of joint, and, if she were born to set it right, she did not know how to do it.

Ch 38

...with all Cynthia's apparent frankness, there were certain limits beyond which her confidence did not go; where her reserve began, and her real self was shrouded in mystery.

Mrs. Gibson was in a flutter of sentimental delight, which she fancied was family affection, she might not have been quite so effervescent if Mr. Kirkpatrick had remained a struggling lawyer, with seven children, living in Doughty Street.