

**THE CUCKOO
IN THE NEST**

VOLUME I.

BY
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CHAPTER I.

THE Seven Thorns was rather an imposing place for a little country inn. It was a long house, not very high, yet containing some good-sized bedrooms on the upper storey, and rooms below calculated for the entertainment of a much greater company than ever appeared now upon the deserted highroad. It had been an old coaching road, and there were stables at the Seven Thorns which could take in half the horses in the county; but that, of course, was all over now. The greater part of these stables were shut up and falling into decay. So was the large dining-room and half of the extensive accommodation downstairs. The great kitchen, and a little room on the other side of the doorway, which was called the parlour, were all that was ever wanted now in the Seven Thorns. Sometimes there would come some excursion parties from the neighbouring town in summer, and then a large table was placed outside, or, on the emergency of a wet day, in the kitchen. This was the only event which ever broke the quiet in these degenerate days.

The usual traffic was confined to the village; to now and then a pedestrian jogging along on foot, sometimes a tramp, sometimes a tourist; or to a farmer going by to market, who remembered the day when the Hewitts of the Seven Thorns were as substantial a family as his own. It was a house which had come down in the world, with a downfall as greatly felt, as much rebelled against, as the fall of the proudest family in the county could have been. The Hewitts had no pretension to be gentry, but they had been yeomen, farming their own land, and giving a large and well-paid hospitality to man and beast, which involved little that was menial

to the family itself. The Richard Hewitt of the day had stood with his hands in his pockets, on his own threshold, talking to his guests about public matters, or the affairs of the county, while his ostlers looked after the horses, and his buxom maid, or rough waiter, brought the gentlemen their beer or more potent draught. He did not touch either horse or glass, but admired the one or shared the other, like any other rustic potentate; and if his pretty daughter glanced out of an upstairs window upon the group at the door, Sir Giles himself would take off his cap, and though perhaps there might be a touch of extravagance in the obeisance, which meant, in his intention, that Patty or Polly was not in the least upon his own level, yet the Patty or Polly of the moment remained completely unconscious of that exaggeration, and blushed, and retired from the window with a delighted sensation of being admired by the gentleman who was always so civil. Alas! these fine days were all past: and when Patience Hewitt now swept out the parlour briskly, as she did everything, and threw fresh wholesome sand upon the floor, and brought in the beer which the young squire, loitering upon the forbidden threshold of the great kitchen, had already several times asked for, the sense of that downfall was as strong in her mind as if she had been the old aunt Patty, old as the world itself, the girl thought, to whom old Sir Giles had taken off his cap.

“Patty! Patty! bring us some beer; and be done with that sweepin’, and come, there’s a ducky, and pour it out yourself.”

“Go to the parlour, Mr. Gervase; that’s your place and not here. If you will have beer in the morning, which is so bad for you, I’ll bring it presently; but you know father won’t have you here.”

“If you’ll have me, I don’t mind old Hewitt, not that!” said Gervase, snapping his thumb and forefinger.

“But I do,” said Patience, with a frown. “Old Hewitt is my father, and those that don’t speak respectful of him had better get out of here, and out of there, too. I won’t have a man in the house that don’t know how to behave himself, if he was a dozen times the squire’s son.”

The young man in question was a lanky youth, long and feeble upon his legs, with light hair longer than is usual, and goggle eyes, in which there was no speculation. He was very much cowed by Patty’s energetic disapproval, and looked as if about to cry.

“Don’t go on at me like that, Patty, don’t, now! I’ll swallow old Hewitt, dirty boots and all, before I’ll have you frown. And do, do have done with your sweepin’ and bring us the beer. I never feel right in the morning till I have had my beer.”

“If you didn’t have too much at night, Mr. Gervase, you wouldn’t want it in the morning.”

“Well, and whose fault is that? I’ll drink no more beer. I’ve promised you, if——”

“If!” said Patty: “it’s a big ‘if.’ If I’ll take you up on my shoulders, that ain’t fit for such a job, and carry you through the world.”

“Come, that’s too bad,” said the young man. “Do you think I can’t take care of my own wife! I never had any intentions that weren’t honourable, and that you well know.”

“You well know,” cried Patty, with a flush of anger, “that the mere saying you hadn’t is enough for me to bundle you neck-and-crop out of this house, and never to speak to you again.”

“Well!” said poor Gervase, “you’re hard to please. If he can’t say that he means well, I don’t know what a fellow may say.”

“If I were in your place, I’d say as little as possible,” said the maid of the inn.

“What a one you are!” cried the young squire, admiringly. “When we’re married I’ll let you do all the talking. You’ll bring round the father and mother a deal sooner than I should. Indeed, they never hearken to me; but, Patty, when you speak——”

“What happens when I speak?”

“The very rector turns round his head. I’ve seen him do it at the church door.”

“Pooh! the rector!” said Patty. “Tell me something a little fresher than that.”

For, in fact, this young woman scorned the rector as one whom she could turn round her little finger. Had not she, ever since the days when she was the quickest at her catechism, the readiest to understand everything, the sharpest to take any hint, the most energetic in action, been known as the rector’s favourite and ally in all parish matters for miles around?

“Is that all you think of him? but he’s of as good a family as we are; and I shouldn’t wonder,” said the young man, with a giggle, “if Mrs. Bethell were to die, as folk say, that he mightn’t come a-wooing to Patty, of the Seven Thorns, same as me.”

“I should like to know,” said Patty, sharply, “what kind of company you’ve been keeping, where they dare to speak of me as Patty of the Seven Thorns? And I suppose you didn’t knock the

fellow down that said it, you poor creature! you're not man enough for that, though I know some——” said Patty, with an air of defiance. She had by this time carried out all her operations, and even drawn the beer, and waved off the thirsty customer before her, driving him, as if he had been a flock of geese, into the parlour, with its newly-sanded floor.

“There!” she said, setting down her tray with a little violence; “it's good stuff enough, but it puts no more heart and strength into you than if you was a mouse. Too much is as bad, or maybe worse, than none at all. And, I tell you, I know some that would no more hear me named disrespectful like that—or any way but Miss Hewitt, Mr. Hewitt of the Seven Thorns' daughter—than I would demean myself to carrying on like a barmaid with every one that comes for a glass of beer into this house.”

“I beg your pardon, Patty,” said the young man; “I meant no harm. When you're Mrs. Gervase Piercey there's never one of them will dare mention your name without taking off his hat.”

“Oh, you block!” cried Patty, exasperated. She paused, however, with an evident sense that to make her meaning clear to him would be impossible; yet added, after a moment, “If I can't be respected as Miss Hewitt, I'll never seek respect under no man's name. There's your beer, Mr. Gervase; and as soon as you've drunk it I advise you to go back to your parents, for you'll get no more here.”

“Oh! Patty, don't you be so cruel.”

“I'll be as cruel as I think proper. And I'll draw father's beer for them as I think proper, and nobody else. You're the spoiled child at the Hall, Mr. Gervase, but no one cares *that* for you here!”

And she, too, snapped her thumb and forefinger, in scorn of any subjection to ordinary prejudices, and shone radiant, in her defiance, in the homely scene to which she gave so much life. Patty was not a beautiful girl, as perhaps you may suppose. She had bright eyes, very well able to flash with indignation when necessary, or even with rage. She had a fine country complexion, with the gift, which is not so usual among the lowly born, of changing colour as her sentiments changed: flashing forth in wrath, and calming down in peace; and when she was excited, with an angry sparkle in her eyes, and the colour rising and falling, there was a *faux air* of beauty about her, which impressed the minds of those who exposed themselves to any such blaze of resentment. Her features, however, were not very good, and there was a hardness in the lines, which, no doubt, would strengthen in later years. She had a trim figure, a brisk light step, an air of knowing her own mind, and fully intending to carry out all its purposes, which made a great impression upon the shiftless and languid generally, and upon Gervase Piercey in particular. Perhaps Patty had a little too much the air, in her sharp intelligence, of the conventional *soubrette*, to have charmed a squire's son of greater intellectual perceptions. But Gervase knew nothing about *soubrettes*, or any other types, theatrical or otherwise. He knew vaguely what he saw, but no more; and that sharp intelligence, that brisk energy, that air of knowing her own mind, was more captivating to him than anything he had ever seen. He, whom everybody snubbed, who was accustomed to be laughed at, who knew so much as to know that he never knew what to do until somebody told him, and often did not understand what was wanted of him then—threw himself upon Patty with all the heavy weight of his nature. He had never seen anything so admirable, so strong, or so fair. She never was afraid to do whatever she had a mind to.

She never stood swaying from one foot to another unable to make up her mind. She was all swiftness, firmness, alertness—ready for anything. He almost liked her to be angry with him, though it sometimes reduced him to abject despair, for the sake of that sparkle, that flush, that exhibition of high spirit. Nobody, Gervase felt, would “put upon him” while Patty was near; nobody would push him aside, bid him to get out of the way. Even his father did this; and, what was still more, his mother too, when exasperated. But they would not, if Patty was there. Gervase was not only in love with her, which he was to the full extent of his abilities in that way, but he felt that his salvation lay in Patty, and that, with her to back him up, nobody would trample upon him any more.

He hoped to find her in a milder humour when he came back in the evening; for in the meantime it was beyond anything he could say or do to charm Patty back into good humour. She went back to her sweeping, making the corners of the kitchen floor ring with the energetic broom that pursued every grain of dust into its last refuge there. She would not stop, even to say good morning to him, when he lounged away. But after he was gone Patty relaxed in her fierce industry. She put away the broom, and stood at the window for a moment, with deep thought upon her brow. What was it she was thinking of, bending those brows, drawing in her upper lip in a way she had when her mind was busy? “To be, or not to be,” that was the question. She was far, very far, from a Hamlet; but that momentous choice was before her, as much as if she had been the mightiest of spirits. When a woman pauses thus upon the threshold of her life, and questions which path she is to take, it is generally easy to guess that the question really is, which man will she marry? Patty was full of ambition as if she had been a princess. And she felt truly as much the child of a fallen house as if Richard Hewitt

of the Seven Thorns had been a ruined duke. How far, how very far was she, Patience, the maid of the inn, drawing beer for the customers, compelled to serve every tramp who had twopence to spend—from the state of young Miss Patty at the upstairs window, sitting like a lady, doing vandykes of tape for her new petticoats (for she was informed of every incident of those times of family grandeur), to whom Sir Giles took off his hat. She had heard all her life of these once glorious circumstances, and her spirit burned within her to do something to restore herself that eminence; to achieve something that would make Aunt Patty hold her tongue, and own herself outdone. Ah! and here it was lying in her power. Sir Giles might have bowed to old Patty, but never did she have it in her power to become Lady Piercey, if she chose. Lady Piercey! with Greyshott Manor at her command, and all the grandeur which the very best of the previous Hewitts had only seen by grace of the housekeeper. And Patty might one day be the mistress of the housekeeper if she chose! The possibility was enough to thrill her from head to foot; but she had not yet made up her mind. No, splendid as the prospect was, there was yet a great deal to think of before she could make up her mind. She went to the door and gave a hurried glance out, to see the long, listless figure of Gervase Piercey strolling along across the wide stretch of broken land that lay between him and his home. He paused to look back several times as he went along, but Patty would not gratify him with the sight of her looking after him. He was not a lover to be encouraged by such signs of favour, but to be kept down at her feet until she should choose to hold out a gracious finger. Her thoughts were not flattering to him as she looked after him: the long, lazy, listless, useless being. If he did not care so much for me, beer would be the chief thing that Mr. Gervase would care for; coming here in the morning for his glass, the fool, instead of doing something! A man

with horses to ride and carriages to drive, and an estate that he might see to, and save his father money! “Lord! lord!” said Patty to herself, “what fools these men are!” for the only thing he could do with himself, to get through the morning, was to walk across to the Seven Thorns for his morning beer, and then to walk back again. She who had a hundred things to do scorned him for this more than words could say. But yet, “first and foremost, before I settle anything,” said Patty, “I’ll see that he’s cured of that. A man that’s always swilling beer morning and evening, if he was a duke, he is not the man for me.”

CHAPTER II.

THE parlour at the Seven Thorns was, in the evening, turned into a sort of village club, where a select number of the fathers of the hamlet assembled night after night to consume a certain amount of beer, to smoke a certain number of pipes, and then to retire at a not very late hour, not much the worse, perhaps, for their potations. It was not a vicious place, nor was it one of revelry. The talk was slow, like the minds of the talkers, and it was chiefly concerned with local events. If now and then there was a public measure which was wide enough, or descended sufficiently low to reach the level of those rustic folk, there might be occasionally a few heavy words on that subject. But this was of the rarest occurrence, and the humours of the heavy assembly were little perceptible to a superficial observer. What was going on at the Manor was of infinitely less interest to this rustic club than what was going on in the village, and unless Sir Giles had turned out his cottagers, or, what was worse, endeavoured to improve their tumble-down habitations, I cannot see why their minds should have been directed to him or his affairs. It is, perhaps, a delusion of the writer, most interested himself in the Squire's family, which lends to the rural public the same inclination. It is true that when young Gervase Piercey first began to appear among them, to be placed in the warmest corner, and served first with whatever he called for, the elders of the village took their pipes out of their mouths and stared. "What do he be a-wanting 'ere?" they said to each other with their eyes, and a head or two was shaken, not only over the inappropriateness of his appearance, but because the presence of the young Squire was more or less a check upon their

native freedom as well as prolixity of talk. Gervase had been known to interrupt a lingering discussion with a "Speak up, old cock!" or with a silly laugh in the wrong place, which confused the speaker and made him forget whereabouts in his subject he was. It was some time, however, before it occurred to them what the young man's motive was, which was made plain by several signs: in the first place by the fact that Patty ceased to serve the customers in the parlour, old Hewitt getting up with many grumbles from the settle to supply their wants himself; then by the impatience of the young man, who had at first smoked his pipe contentedly in his corner, interrupting the conversation only by those silly laughs of his, or by an equally foolish question, which, though idiotic in itself, was the cause of discomfiture to a village orator accustomed to have everything his own way; and then it was observed that Gervase let his pipe go out and kept his eyes upon the door, and then that he became very uneasy when the brisk voice of Patty was heard outside, presumably talking with the younger frequenters of the place, who hung about the precincts of the Seven Thorns, or occupied the bench under the window of the parlour. When the young squire at last got up and went out, the sages said little, but they looked at each other or nudged each other, those who were close enough pointing with their long pipes over their shoulders, and finally burst forth into a slow roar, shaking their sides. "Softy if 'e be, 'e knows wat's wat as well as ere another," said the "*Maestro de chi sanno*," the sage of sages, the Aristotle of the village. This revelation slowly communicated itself over the parish, "The young squire, he be after Patty Hewitt o' the Seven Thorns; but Patty is one as will keep him in his place, and no mistake," was the popular verdict. The parish knew, even better than the gentry did, that Gervase—Sir Giles' only child—was a softy; it knew his habits, and that he was good for nothing, not

even to take a hand at cards or field a ball at cricket, so that his dangling after Patty Hewitt caused nobody any anxiety. She knew how to keep him in his own place; no village story of lovely woman stooping to folly was likely to arise in her case. The Softy was a good creature enough, and harmed nobody, except by that exasperating laugh of his, which made the persons interrupted by it furious, but broke no bones, everybody allowed. So that it was more on Gervase's account than Patty's that the village concerned itself. "She do be making a fool of 'im," they said with gratification; for was not this a just revenge for other maidens wronged by other young squires of higher qualities than poor Gervase. Generally there was a slow satisfaction in the triumph of the people over the gentry, as thus exemplified; yet a general wish that Patty should not push that triumph too far.

On the evening of the day on which this story begins, he had kept in the parlour as long as his patience lasted, always looking for the moment when she should appear; for the mind of Gervase worked very slowly, and he had not yet begun to understand as a rule, what all the parish already knew, that Patty now entered the parlour no more in the evening. Gervase knew that he had not seen her for night after night, but he had no faculty for putting this and that together, and he did not draw the natural conclusion that she had so settled it with her father. Nor had he found much advantage in going out to the door, in following the sound of her voice, which seemed to flicker about like a will-o'-the-wisp, now sounding close at hand, now from a distance. When Patty was visible she was generally in close conversation with some one—Roger Pearson as often as not, was an antagonist whom Gervase had sense enough not to encounter. And, accordingly, it was the most rare thing in the world when he had any nearer view of the object of his

admiration than the dim outline of her, in the dark, flitting about in front of the house with her tray, and not to be interrupted; or perhaps strolling off beyond the seven thorns which gave their name to the house, with another tall figure beside her. Roger Pearson was the athlete of the village. It was he who commanded the eleven got up between Greyshott and Windyhill, which had beaten almost every eleven that had met them, and certainly every other eleven in the county; and he was a leading volunteer, a great football player, everything that it is most glorious in English country life to be. Gervase did not venture to contest openly the favour of Patty with this stalwart fellow. He stood on the threshold with his mouth open, and his heart rung, and watched them stroll away together in the moonlight, losing sight of them in the shadow of the thorns: waiting till they emerged beyond upon the great flat of the moorland country among the furze bushes. Poor Softy! to see the lady of his love thus taken away from him by a stronger than he, was very hard upon him. Though he was a Softy, there was in Gervase so much of that feeling of the gentleman, which can be transmitted by blood and by the atmosphere of an ancient house—as made him aware that to make his possible wife the object of a brawl was not to be thought of, even had he felt any confidence in his own courage and muscles as against those of Roger. So that both these reasons held him back: the instinct of the weakling, and the instinct of the gentleman too. If he could have fought with and overthrown Roger on any other argument, how he would have rejoiced! He planned in his dreams a hundred ways of doing so, but never in his waking moments ventured to cross that hero's path: and he would not make a row over Patty. No! no! even if he could have seized Roger by the collar and pitched him to the other side of the moor, as Roger, he was convinced, would do to him if the opportunity ever arose, he would not have done it to

bring in Patty's name and make her talked about. No! no! He said this to himself as he stood at the door and watched them with his mouth open and watering, and his heart sore. Poor Gervase; there was something in it, even if not so much as he thought.

But this evening, by a happy chance, Roger was not there. Gervase found Patty standing alone, wholly indifferent to the two or three vague figures which were dimly visible on the bench beneath the lighted window of the parlour. It was such a chance for Gervase as had never happened before. He whistled softly, but Patty took no notice; he called her by her name in a whisper, but she never turned her head. Was she regretting the other man, the fellow who had nothing to offer her but a cottage, and who was far too busy with his cricket matches and things ever to earn much money, or even to stay at home with his wife? Gervase ventured upon a great step. He came up behind her and seized Patty's hand, which was akimbo, firmly placed upon her side.

"Who's that?" she cried, throwing off the touch; "and what are you wanting here?"

"You know well enough who it is—it's Gervase come to have a word——"

"Oh!" said Patty, disdainfully, "it's the young gentleman from the Manor as has no right to be here."

"Yes, it is me," said Gervase, not quick enough to take up the scorn in her speech. "Come, Patty, let's take a little turn round the Thorns: do, now!—there's nobody else coming to-night."

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