

The Cuckoo in the Nest

VOLUME II.

BY
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Cuckoo In The Nest

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHAPTER XXX.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CHAPTER XL.

CHAPTER XLI.

CHAPTER XLII.

CHAPTER XLIII.

CHAPTER XLIV.

CHAPTER XLV.

CHAPTER XLVI.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST

CHAPTER XXVI.

COLONEL PIERCEY had been walking up and down somewhat impatiently for some time, at the corner of the rose-garden where Osy had left him. The child had not then seen the lady at the window who asked who was that little boy; and this incident and the account of it, which Osy had hastened to give to his mother, had naturally occupied some time. He was not much accustomed to wait, and did not like it. And when he saw Margaret come slowly along, some half-hour after he had sent, what he felt was a very respectful message to her, asking her to allow him a few minutes' conversation, the curious opposition and sense of inevitable hostility which he felt towards his cousin, was sharpened into a keen feeling of resentment. She had held him at bay all along, never treated him with confidence or friendliness; and if she chose to affect fine-lady airs of coyness and pride *now!* It was quite unconsciously to himself, and he was by nature a man full of generosity, who would have been more astonished than words could say, had he been charged with presuming upon adverse circumstances; and yet he was far more angry with Margaret in her dependent position than he would have been with any woman more happily situated. He felt that she, as women he believed generally did, was disposed to stand upon the superiority of being at so great a disadvantage, and to claim consideration from the very fact that she got it from no one. Why should she bear the spurns of all the unworthy, and mount upon that pedestal of patient merit to him? It was not that he felt it natural to treat her badly because other people did, but because the fact that other people did, gave her the opportunity of assuming that it would be the same with him. He

would have liked to take her by the shoulders and shake out of her that aspect of injury, without knowing that he dared not have entertained that fierce intention towards any one who was not injured. Finally, he watched her coming towards him slowly, showing her reluctance in every step, with an impatience and disinclination to put up with it, which was almost stronger than any feeling of personal opposition he had ever felt in his life. She said, before she had quite come up to him: "I am sorry I have kept you waiting. Osy has only given me your message now."

It was on his lips to say: "You are not sorry to have kept me waiting!" but he subdued that impulse. A man like Colonel Piercey cannot give a woman the lie direct, unless in very serious circumstances indeed. He replied stiffly: "I fear I have taken a great liberty in asking you to meet me here at all."

Margaret answered only with a faint smile and wave of her hand, which seemed to Colonel Piercey to say as plainly as words: "Everybody offers me indignity; why not you, too?" which, perhaps, was not very far from the fact; though she was a great deal too proud to have ever said, or even implied, anything of the kind. He answered his own supposition hotly, by saying: "I know no other place where we should be safe from interruption, and I thought it my duty to—— speak to you about the new condition of affairs."

"Yes?" said Margaret. "I am afraid I have very little light to throw on the position; but I shall be glad to hear what you have to say."

All that he said in the meantime was, with some resentment: “You don’t seem so much startled by what has happened as I should have supposed.”

“I was much startled to see Patty—I mean the person whom we must now call Mrs. Gervase—at the funeral. But of course, after that, one was prepared for all the rest. I don’t know that I had much reason to be startled even at that. From the moment we found that she was absent while he was absent, I ought to have, and indeed I did, divine what must have occurred. However sure one is of such a thing, it is startling, all the same, when one comes to see it actually accomplished; but I ought not to say more than that.”

“You take it with much philosophy,” Colonel Piercey said.

“Do you think so? I should be glad to think I was so strong-minded; for there is probably no one to whom it will make so much difference as to me.”

“That is why I felt that I must speak to you. Can nothing be done to prevent this?”

“To prevent what?” she said, with some surprise.

“The reign of this woman over Uncle Giles’ house, in Aunt Piercey’s place! It is too intolerable; it is enough to make the old lady rise from her grave.”

“Poor old Aunt Piercey! She has been taken away from the evil to come. I am glad that she is dead, and has not had this to bear.”

“I suppose women have tears at their will,” cried Colonel Piercey, bursting forth in an impatience which he could restrain no

longer. "She was not so kind to you that you should feel so tenderly for her."

"How do you know she was not kind to me? She was natural, at all events," cried Margaret. "It has all been quite natural up to this time; I went away and I came back, and whatever happened to me, I was at home. But you, Colonel Piercey, you are not natural. I have no right to accept contumely at your hands. You came here with a suspicion of Heaven knows what in your mind; you thought I had some design: what was the design which you suspected me of having against the happiness of this household? I warned you that you should have some time or other to explain what you meant—to me."

Colonel Piercey stood confronting her among the roses which formed so inappropriate a background, and did not know what reply to make. He had not expected that assault. Answer to a man for whatever you have said or seemed to say, and whatever may lie behind, that is simple enough; but to explain your injurious thoughts to a woman, who does not even soften the situation by saying that she has no one to protect her—that is a different matter. He grew red, and then grew grey. He had no more notion what to answer to her than he had what it was, actually and as a matter of fact, that he had suspected. He had not suspected anything. He had felt that a woman like this could never have accepted the position of dependence, unless—— That such a person must be a dangerous and hostile force—that she had wrongs to redress, a position to make—how could he tell? It had been instinctive, he had never known what he thought.

"Cousin Meg——" he said, hesitating.

“From the moment,” she said indignantly, “in which you set me up as a schemer and designing person in the home that sheltered me, these terms of relationship have been worse than out of place.”

Poor Colonel Piercey! He was as far from being a coward as a man could be. If he did not write V.C. after his name, it was, perhaps, because the opportunity had not come to him of acquiring that distinction; he was the kind of man of which V.C.'s are made. But now, no expedient, save that of utter cowardice, occurred to him; for the first time in his life he ran away.

“I am very sorry you will not accord me these terms,” he said, meekly; “I don’t understand what you accuse me of. *I* think you a schemer and designing person! how could I? If you will excuse me, there is no sense in such a suggestion. Unless I had been a fool—and I hope, at least, that you don’t consider me a fool—how could I have thought anything of the kind? You must think me either mad or an idiot,” he went on, gaining a little courage. “I came here with no suspicions. I have been angry,” he added, turning his head away, “to see my cousin, Meg Piercey, at everybody’s beck and call, and to see how careless they were of you, and how exacting, and how——”

“All this,” said Margaret, with surprise, “should have made you look upon me with compassion instead of something like insult.”

“Oh, compassion,” he cried, “to you! I should have thought that the worst insult of all. You are not a person to be pitied. However I may have offended, I have always felt that——”

The end of this statement was part of the process of running away. Indeed, he was very much frightened, and felt the falseness of his position extremely. He had not a word to say for himself. To upbraid her—at a moment when her home, her last shelter, was probably about to be taken from her, and herself thrown upon the world with her helpless child—he, perhaps, being the only person who had any right to help her—was the most impossible thing in the world. And though his opinion had no time or occasion to have changed, it had always been an opinion founded upon nothing. A more curious state of mind could scarcely be. He was dislodged from his position at the point of Margaret's sword, so to speak. And he had never had any ground for that position, or right to have assumed it; and yet he was still there in mind, though in word and profession he had run away. Margaret did not understand this complicated state of mind. She was half amused by the dismay in his face, by his too swift and complete change of front. The *amende* which he had made was as complete as any apology and confession could be, though it was an apology by implication, rather than a direct denial of blame. "How could I?" is different from "I did not." But she did not dwell upon this.

"Of course," she said, "I have no right not to accept what you say, though it is, perhaps, strangely expressed. And I scarcely know what there is I can explain to you. My aunt feared this that has taken place, before I did: she naturally thought less of her son's deficiencies. She was so imprudent, as I thought it, as to warn the girl of things she would do to prevent it. I believe there was really nothing that could have been done to prevent it. And then she was equally imprudent in letting him go to town, and thus giving him the opportunity. She thought she could secure him by putting him in the hands of the clergyman, who never saw him at all. I feared

very much how it would be, and poor Gervase was several times on the point of betraying himself. Perhaps, if I had sought his confidence—— But his mother would not have paid any attention to what I could say. And I don't know what could have been done to prevent it.”

“Why, he is next to an idiot!”

“Oh no,” cried Margaret, half offended. “Gervase is not an idiot. He has gleams of understanding, quite—almost, as clear as any one. He knows what he wants, and though you may think his mind has no steadiness, you will find he always comes back to his point. He has a kind of cleverness, even, at times. Oh no; Aunt Piercey examined into all that. They could not make him out incapable of managing his own affairs. To be sure, he has not had any to manage up to this time. And now that he has this sharp Patty behind him,” said Margaret, with a half smile——

“Then you think nothing can be done?”

“What could be done? You could not do anything in Uncle Giles' lifetime to turn his only child out of his inheritance.”

“It is you,” said Colonel Piercey, “who are imputing intentions now. I had no such idea. I think my business as next-of-kin is to defend the poor fellow. But the woman; that is a different thing.”

“The woman is his wife. I don't want to assume any unnatural impartiality. But, after all, is he likely ever to have had a better wife? I believe she will be an excellent wife to Gervase. One of his own class, I hope, would not have married him.”

“Why do you say, ‘I hope?’ Is that not worse than anything that could be said?”

“Perhaps,” said Margaret. “Poor Gervase is not an idiot, but neither is he just like other people. And a girl might have been driven into it, and then might have found——” She added, with a little shiver, “It is the best thing that could have happened for him to marry Patty. I hate it, of course. How could I do otherwise? But as far as he himself is concerned——”

“You are a great philosopher, Cousin Meg.”

“Do you think so?” Half resentful as she was, and not more than half satisfied with Colonel Piercey’s explanations, he was yet the only person in the world to whom she could speak with freedom; and it was a relief to her. “She will look after Uncle Giles’ comfort, and he will get to like her,” she continued. “She will rule the household with a rod of iron.” Margaret laughed, though her face settled down the next moment into a settled gravity. “They will have no society, but they will not want it. She will keep them amused. Perhaps it is the best thing that could have happened,” she said.

“And you? and the boy?” He stopped and looked at her standing among the roses, which were very luxuriant in the last climax of maturity, full blown, shedding their leaves, just about to topple over from that height of life into the beginning of decay. Margaret had no trace of decay about her, but she, too, was in the full height of life, the fulfilment of promise, standing at the *mezzo di cammin*, and full of all capabilities. She did not look up at him, but answered with a half-smile,—

“I—and the boy? We are not destitute. Perhaps it will be better for us both to set out together, and live our own life.”

“You are not destitute? I hope you will pardon me. After what you think my conduct has been, you may say I have no right——”

Margaret smiled in spite of herself.

“But you say that your conduct has been—not what I thought.”

“Yes, yes, that is so: I have not been such a fool. Cousin Meg, we were great friends in the old days.”

“Not such very great friends—no more than girls and boys are when they are not specially attached to each other.”

He thought that she intended to give him a little prick with one of those thorns which the matured rose still keeps upon its stalk; and he felt the prick, which, being still more mature than she, he ought not to have done.

“I think it was a little more than that,” he said, in a slight tone of pique; “but anyhow—we are cousins.”

“Very distant cousins.”

“Distant cousins,” he cried, impatiently, “are near when there are no nearer between. We are of the same blood, at least. You want to push me away, to make me feel I have nothing to do with it; but that can’t be so long as you are Meg Piercey——”

“Margaret Osborne at your service,” she said, gravely. “Forgive me, Cousin Gerald. It is true, we have had enough of this tilting. I don’t doubt for a moment that you would give me a helping hand if you could; that you wish me well, and especially,” she added, lifting her eyes with a half reproach, half gratitude in them, “the boy—as you call him.”

“What could I call him but the boy?” said Colonel Piercey, with a sort of exasperation. “Yes, I don’t deny it, it was of him I wanted to speak. He is a delightful boy—he is full of faculty and capacity, and one could make anything of him. Let me say quite sincerely what I think. You are not destitute; but you are not rich enough to give him the best of everything in the way of education, as—as—don’t slay me with a flash of lightning—as I could. Now I have said it! If you would trust him to me!”

She had looked, indeed, for a moment as if her eyes could give forth lightning enough to have slain any man standing defenceless before her; but then these eyes softened with hot tears. She kept looking at the man, explaining himself with such difficulty, putting forth his offer of kindness as if it were some dreadful proposition, with a gradual melting of the lines in her face. When he threw a hasty glance at her at the end of his speech, she seemed to him a woman made of fire, shedding light about her in an astonishing transfiguration such as he had never seen before.

“This,” she said, in a low voice, “is the most terrible demonstration of my poverty and helplessness that has ever been made to me—and the most awful suggestion, as of suicide and destruction.”

“Meg!”

“Don’t, don’t interrupt me! It is: I have never known how little good I was before. I don’t know now if it will kill me, or sting me to life; but all the same,” she cried, her lip quivering, “you are kind, and I thank you with all my heart! and I will promise you this: If I find, as you think, that, whatever I may do, I cannot give my Osy the education he ought to have, I will send and remind you of your

offer. I hope you will have children of your own by that time, and perhaps you will have forgotten it.”

“I shall not forget it; and I am very unlikely to have children of my own.”

“Anyhow, I will trust you,” she said, “and I thank you with all my heart, though you are my enemy. And that is a bargain,” she said, holding out her hand.

Her enemy! Was he her enemy? And yet it seemed something else beside.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHILE these scenes were going on, Mr. and Mrs. Gervase Piercey were very differently employed upstairs. When Patty had finished her tea, and when she had made the survey of the library, concerning which her conclusion was that these horrid bookcases must be cleared away, and that a full-length portrait of herself in the white satin which had not, yet ought to have been, her wedding-dress, would do a great deal for the cheerfulness of the room, she took her husband's arm, and desired him to conduct her over the house. When Patty saw the drawing-room, which was very large, cold, and light in colour, with chairs and chandeliers in brown holland, she changed her mind about the library. She had not been aware of the existence of this drawing-room.

“This is where we shall sit, of course,” she said.

“Father can't abide it,” said Gervase.

“Oh, your father is a very nice old gentleman. He will have to put up with it,” said the new lady of the house.

In imagination she saw herself seated there, receiving the county, and the spirit of Patty was uplifted. She felt, for the first time, without any admixture of disappointment, that here was her sphere. When she was taken upstairs, however, to Gervase's room, she regarded it by no means with the same satisfaction. It was a large room, but sparsely furnished, in no respect like the luxurious bower she had imagined for herself.

“Take off my bonnet here!” she said: “no, indeed I sha'n't. Why, there is not even a drapery to the toilet table. I have not come

to Greyshott, I hope, to have less comfort than I had at home. There must be spare rooms. Take me to the best of the spare rooms.”

“There’s the prince’s room,” said Gervase, “but nobody sleeps there since some fellow of a prince—I can’t tell you what prince— And I haven’t got the keys; it’s Parsons that has got the keys.”

“You can call Parsons, I suppose. Ring the bell,” said Patty, seizing the opportunity to look at herself in the glass, though she surveyed the room with contempt.

“Lord!” cried Gervase. “Parsons, mother’s own woman——.” Then he threw himself down in his favourite chair with his hands in his pockets. “You can do it yourself. I’m not going to catch a scolding for you.”

“A scolding!” said Patty; “and who is going to scold you, you silly fellow, except me? I should like to see them try—Mrs. Parsons or Sir Giles, or any one. You can just say, ‘Speak to my wife.’”

“There’s mother, that you daren’t set up your face to. I say,” said Gervase; “Patty, what’s all this about mother? Mother’s—dead? She’ll never have a word to say about anything any more?”

“Dear mother!” said Patty. “You must always say dear mother, Gervase, now: I’m sure I should have loved her—but, you see, Providence never gave me the opportunity. No, she’ll never have a word to say: it’s me that will have everything to say.—Oh, you have answered the bell at last! Send Mrs. Parsons here.”

“Mrs. Parsons, ma’am—my lady?” the frightened little under-housemaid, who had been made to answer, said.

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