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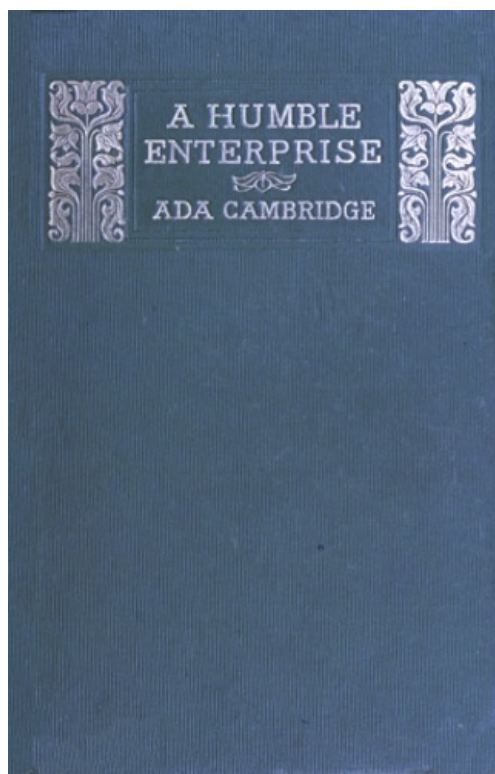
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A HUMBLE ENTERPRISE ***



A
HUMBLE ENTERPRISE
BY
ADA CAMBRIDGE

AUTHOR OF
"THE THREE MISS KINGS," "FIDELIS,"
"A LITTLE MINX," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ST. CLAIR SIMMONS

Second Edition

LONDON
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**"Pinned the fragrant morsel to her throat."
*A Humble Enterprise. Page 97.***

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A HUMBLE ENTERPRISE

CHAPTER I

THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL

Joseph Liddon was deaf, and one day, when he was having a holiday in the country, he crossed a curving railway line, and a train, sweeping round the corner when he was looking another way, swept him out of existence. On his shoulder he was carrying the infrequent and delightful gun—reminiscent of happy days in English coverts and stubble fields—and in his hand he held a dangling hare, about the cooking of which he was dreaming pleasantly, wondering whether his wife would have it jugged or baked. When they stopped the train and gathered him up, he was as dead as the hare, dissolved into mere formless tatters, and his women-folk were not allowed to see him afterwards. They came up from town to the inquest and funeral—wife and two daughters, escorted by a downy-lipped son—all dazed and bewildered in their suddenly transformed world; and a gun and a broken watch and a few studs, that had been carefully washed and polished, were the only "remains" on which they could expend the valedictory kiss and tear. Their last memory of him was full of the gay bustle of farewell at Spencer Street when he set forth upon his trip. It was such an event for him to have a holiday, and to go away by himself, that the whole family had to see him off. Even young Joe was on the platform to carry his father's bag, and buy him the evening papers, his train being the Sydney express, which did not leave till after office hours. When they knew how the holiday had ended, their bitter regrets for not having accompanied him further were greatly soothed by the knowledge that they had gone with him so far—had closed their life together with an act of love that had made him happy.

He had been born a gentleman in the technical sense, and had lived a true man in every sense. In spite of this—to a great extent, probably, because of it—he had not been very successful in the world; that is to say, he had not made himself important or rich. Money had not come to him with his gentle blood, and he had not had the art to command it, nor ever would have had. It is a pursuit that requires the whole energies of one's mind, and his mind had been distributed a good deal. He was fond of books, which was a fatal weakness; he was fond of little scientific experiments, which was worse; he was indifferent to the sovereign rule of public opinion and the advantages enjoyed by those who can cut a dash, which was worst of all. And, besides, he was deaf. He had begun to grow deaf when quite a young man, after having a fever, and by the time he was fifty one had to shout at him.

So, when at fifty-six he met his untimely end, because he could not hear the train behind him, he was in the position of a clerk in a merchant's office, highly valued and trusted indeed, but worth no more than £370 per annum, which salary he had received for sixteen years. The £70 had paid the rent of the little house in which he had dwelt with his family for the greater part of that time, and on the remainder they had lived quite comfortably, in a small way, by dint of good management, without owing a penny to anybody. Mrs. Liddon, otherwise a comparatively uncultured person, was an accomplished cook and domestic administrator; Jenny, the eldest daughter, in whom the qualities of both parents blended, got up early in the morning to buy provisions at the market, and did all the dressmaking for the family; Joe, a junior in his father's office, paid something for his board, and otherwise kept and clothed himself; and Sarah, the youngest, who had a bent spine, was literary, like her father, in whose intellectual pursuits she had had the largest share, and morally indispensable, though not practically supporting, in the economy of the household.

When the father was gone, the income was gone too, and the home as it had been. Mother and children found themselves possessed of £500, paid by an insurance office, and their little family belongings, and a few pounds that had been kept in store for the casual rainy day. To this the firm who had employed him would have added a gift of £100 had the pride of these humble folks allowed it; and their relatives were also prepared to "do something" in the way of what seemed necessary help. But the first resolution come to by the bereaved ones, when resolutions had to be taken, was to decline all such help and depend upon themselves. That being settled, they sat down to consult together as to how they might invest their capital to the best advantage, so as to make it the foundation of their future livelihood. Jenny called the meeting a few days after their return from the funeral, and insisted that all should rouse themselves to a sense of the extreme seriousness of the situation.

"We must at once set to work," she said impressively; "and we must not shilly-shally about it either. Make your suggestions first, and then, if I don't like them, I will make mine. What is your notion, mother?"

"Oh, my dear, I'm sure I don't know," quavered Mrs. Liddon, as she drew forth the constant handkerchief; "I have no heart to think of anything yet." She sobbed. "I suppose a boarding-house—that's the usual thing. We *must* have our own house and keep together; I could never bear to part with any of you—all I've got now!" The handkerchief went to her eyes, "Certainly we will all keep together," the children declared, extending arms towards her. "That's understood, of course. That's what we are planning for, first of all."

"And seeing that I can *cook*," whimpered the widow, "if I can't do anything else—"

"Yes, dear," Jenny broke in. "But I don't think a boarding-house would do, somehow. We haven't enough to make a good one, and to make it safe. You see Melbourne simply swarms with them already."

"And you'd have to take men—women are no good, and, besides, there aren't any—and I won't have all sorts of clerks and cads making free in the house with my sisters," said young Joe severely.

"We needn't let them make free," said Jenny, smiling.

"And you're only a clerk yourself," said Sarah.

"And I don't think there's a boarding-house in the town that would have a table like mine for the money," said his mother, with spirit, and with the air of having considered the subject.

Jenny thought for a minute or two, rapidly; then she shook her head. "Too much outlay," she objected, "and the result too uncertain."

"Everything is uncertain in this world," sighed Mrs. Liddon, disappointed and discouraged. "Then what do you propose yourself, my dear? A school?"

Jenny shook her head again. "The place is literally *stiff* with them," she replied. "And, even if there were room for us, we are not qualified."

"Let us have a four-roomed cottage," said Sarah, "and keep ourselves to ourselves; have no servant, and take in sewing or type-writing."

"We should be insolvent in a couple of years or so," her sister replied, "and we should cripple Joey."

"As to that," said Joey, "I'm not afraid. I *want* to take care of you, and I *ought*. I am the only man in the family, and women have no business to work and slave while they have a man to do for them."

"My poor boy! On a hundred and thirty pounds a year!"

"It won't always be a hundred and thirty."

"No, Joe. We can do better than that. Thank you all the same, old fellow."

"Well, tell us how you can do better."

He squared his arms on the table and looked at her. Her mother and sister also looked at her, for it was evident that she was about to bring forth her scheme, and that she expected it to impress them.

"What I should have *liked*," she began, "if there had been money enough for a fair start—which there isn't—is a—quite a peculiar and particular—not in any way a conventional—*shop*."

"Oh!"

"Good gracious!"

"Go *on*!"

"You needn't all look so shocked. A shop such as *I* should have would be a different kind of thing from the common, I assure you. I have often thought of it. I have always felt"—with a smile of confidence—"that I had it in me to conduct a good business—that I could give the traditional shopkeeper 'points,' as Joey would say. However, like the boarding-house, it would swallow up all the money at one gulp, so it can't be done."

"A good job too," said Joey with a rough laugh.

"Don't say that without thinking," rejoined the girl, whose intelligent face had brightened with the mention of her scheme. "I daresay you would rather be a millionaire—so would I; but you must remember we have to earn our bread, without much choice as to ways of doing it. It would have been nice, after a day's work"—she looked persuadingly at Sarah—"to have had tea in our own back parlour, all alone by ourselves, free and comfortable; and in the evening to have totted up our takings for the day—all cash, of course—and seen them getting steadily bigger and bigger; and by-and-by—because I *know* that, with a good start, I should have succeeded—to have become well enough off to sell out, and go to travel in Europe, and do things."

"Ah—*that*!" sighed Sarah, who had a thin, large-eyed, eager face that betokened romantic aspirations.

"If I had only myself to consider, I would do it now," said Jenny. "But there are you three—*your* money must not be risked."

Joey thought of an elegant little cousin up country, the daughter of a bank manager, who naturally turned up her nose at retail trade; and he said that, as the present head of the family—he was afraid Jenny was over-looking the fact that he held this position by divine right of sex—he should certainly withhold his sanction from any such absurd project, risk or no risk. "Thank the

Lord," he blustered angrily, "we have not come down to *that*—not yet!"

She laughed in his face. "You talked about cads just now," she said; "take care you don't get tainted with their ideas yourself. And don't forget that you are only nineteen, while I am twenty-four, and mother is just twice as old as that; and that what little we have is hers; and that women in these days are as good as men, and much better than boys; and that you are expected to allow us to know what is best for a few years more."

She was a diminutive creature, barely five feet high; but she had the moral powers of a giantess, and was really a remarkable little person, though her family was not aware of it. Joey loved her dearly in an easy-going brotherly way, but maintained that she "bossed the show" unduly at times, and on such occasions he was apt to kick against her pretensions. Lest he should do so now, and an unseemly squabble ensue, Mrs. Liddon interposed with the remark that it was useless to discuss what was impracticable, and begged her daughter to come to business.

"Well," said Jenny then, fixing her bright eyes on the boy's sulky but otherwise handsome face, "this is my proposal—that we open a tea-room—a sort of refined little restaurant for quiet people, don't you know; a kind of—"

Joey rose ostentatiously from his chair.

"Sit down, Joey, and listen to me," commanded Jenny.

"I'm not going to sit down and listen to a lot of tommy-rot," was Joey's scornful reply.

"Very well—go away, then; we can talk a great deal better without you. Take a walk. And when you come back we will tell you what we have decided on."

This advice had its natural effect. Joey sat down again, stretched out his legs, and thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets. Jenny proceeded to unfold her plan to her mother and sister, taking no notice of his sarcastic criticisms.

"Now, dears," she said earnestly, "you know we *must* do something to keep ourselves, and at the same time to keep a home; don't you?"

They sighed acquiescence.

"And that isn't playwork—we don't expect it to be all pleasure; and we can't afford to have fine-lady fancies, can we?"

They agreed to this, reluctantly.

"Well, then, if we can't do what we would like, we must do what we can. And I can't think of anything more promising than this. I would have quite a small place to begin with—one room, and some sort of kitchen to prepare things in—because rent is the only serious matter, and we must make the thing self-supporting from the first; that is the attraction of my plan, if it has an attraction—the thing I have been specially scheming for. Because, you see, then, if we fail, there won't be any great harm done."

"The publicity!" murmured Mrs. Liddon; and Joey took up the word, and drew offensive pictures of rowdy men invading the establishment, calling for food and drink, and addressing these born ladies as "my dear."

"There will be nothing of that sort," said Jenny calmly. "The place will have no attractions for that class. We must not prohibit men, for that would discourage general custom——"

"Oh—custom!" sneered Joey, with an air of loathing.

"But it will be a woman's place, that men would not think of coming to except to bring women. Just a quiet room, mother; not all rows of chairs and tables, like a common restaurant—the best of our own furniture, with some wicker chairs added, and a few small tables, like a comfortable private sitting-room, only not so crowded; and floored with linoleum, so that we can wash it easily. Then just tea and coffee and scones—perhaps some little cakes—nothing perishable or messy; perhaps some delicate sandwiches, so that ladies can make a lunch. Only these simple things, but *they* as perfectly good as it is possible to make them. Mother, *your* scones——"

Mrs. Liddon smiled. She saw at once that her scones alone would make the tea-room famous.

"We must do everything ourselves," said Jenny, "*everything*; no out-goings except for rent and our few superfine groceries. Consequently we must not undertake too much. Say we open at eleven o'clock and close at eight—no, at seven. That will give us time to prepare in the morning, and our evenings for rest. Mother, dear, you must cook. I will wait. We cannot accommodate more than twenty or so at first, and I can manage that. Sarah can get ready the tea and coffee, and perhaps take the money when we are busy. A few dozen of nice white cups and saucers and a lot of plates—I could get them wholesale. I wish we could afford nice table covers, but I am afraid they, and the washing, would cost too much; we must have American cloth, I suppose. And butter—we must be very careful what arrangements we make for butter, to be sure of having it new every morning; and we must keep it cold—*that*, above all things. Though we only give tea and scones, let everybody say that they never bought such tea and scones before. Eh, mother?"

"They won't buy better, if I have anything to do with it," said Mrs. Liddon, putting her handkerchief in her pocket.

Thus Jenny unfolded her scheme, and gradually talked her family into a conditional agreement with it. Only Joey was persistently hostile, and he, when she begged him to suggest a better, was fain to acknowledge that no better occurred to him. All he hoped and trusted was that his sister would not drag the family name into the mire—that was to say, not more so than the wretched state of things necessitated. "The Liddons," said the boy, as he rose from the interview, "have never been in trade before."

"And wouldn't you rather be a proprietor in Churchill & Son's than a junior clerk?" was Jenny's quick retort, as he left the room.

The only possible rejoinder was to bang the door, and Joey banged it heartily.

CHAPTER II

HER FIRST FRIEND

The chief of Churchill & Son suffered no social disadvantage from being in trade, and enjoyed many satisfactions that are unknown to the wealthy who have nothing to do. His mind was alert and keen, his large, wholesome-looking body a picture of well-being and contentment, his attitude towards the world and things in general one of consistent self-respect. He was one of that numerous band of perfectly-dressed and exquisitely clean old gentlemen who pervade the city-wending tram-cars of a morning between 9 and 10 o'clock, and are a delight to the eyes of all true lovers of their country, as comprising the solid base of its material prosperity. Solid in every sense was Mr. Nicholas Churchill, a sound, just man, whose word was his bond, and whose signature was good for six figures at the bank; a man who had succeeded in life and commerce without cheating anybody, and was esteemed according to his deserts, as we all are—though we don't always think so.

He walked into the breakfast-room of his little palace at Toorak, on a certain spring morning, and, having kissed his children and shaken hands with the governess, sat down to table and propped his newspaper before him. His wife, a smart young lady in a long-tailed lace-frilled gown, poured out his coffee, and his married daughter helped him to fish; for it was a rule of the house to save him all trouble of helping himself or others at this end of the day. The married daughter, Mrs. Oxenham, was rather older than his wife, and was not now a member of the household, but a visitor from a large station in the north-eastern hills; she had come down to meet the mail which was bringing out her brother, Mr. Churchill's eldest son, from home, and the arrival of which at Adelaide had been telegraphed the day before. She was a tall, distinguished-looking woman, a source of great pride and enjoyment to her father, who addressed to her the most of what little conversation he had time for.

"This is curious," he remarked, between two mouthfuls of buttered toast. "Look here, Mary—poor old Liddon's wife, I'll bet you anything. Read this."

She leaned over to him, and looked at the newspaper where he had fixed it to the table with a broad thumb. After a short silence she ejaculated, "Oh, *poor* things!" It was her comment upon the following advertisement:—

"TO LADIES SHOPPING. Quiet room, with good tea and scones. Open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. MRS. LIDDON, No. —, Little Collins Street, W."

"Well," said Mr. Churchill, "it is not our fault. We were ready and willing to assist them."

"As was only right," Mrs. Oxenham murmured, "seeing how long he was with the firm."

"And as good a servant as it ever had. Yes, I felt that it was our duty to do something for the widow and children, and I sent them a little sum—a cheque for a hundred it was—thinking it might be acceptable. You'd have thought so, wouldn't you? I've done it before, dozens of times, and always found 'em grateful. But here—well, they just sent it back by return of post."

"Oh!" A faint flush overspread his daughter's face. "Did you put it nicely, do you think?"

"I didn't put it at all, but it was a very proper letter—I read it before I signed it—speaking most highly of the old fellow's character and services, and all that sort of thing. In fact, they thanked us for what we said of him, and didn't seem to feel insulted—it was a nice little note enough—"

"Whose?"

"Janet Liddon was the name—his daughter, writing on her mother's behalf. But the money they wouldn't touch with a pair of tongs. Too proud, of course."

"Of course. Oh, I do like to hear of that kind of pride! I was afraid it had died right out in these sordid times."

"So was I. I can tell you it struck me uncommonly; I thought about it a good deal; it was so unusual. I spoke to the young fellow, and he said it was his mother and sister—his sister chiefly—who wouldn't have it. And now they've opened this little place—it is they, I am convinced—to

keep themselves. I'll tell you what it is, Mary, they're fine women, that mother and daughter—fine women, my dear. I'd like to look them up—sort of apologise for offering alms, as it were—eh? They'll want custom for their tea-room. Maude—I say, Maude"—the young lady of the house was so deep in talk with the governess about house decorations for a party that it was difficult to gain her ear—"Maude, my child, can't you take some of your friends to tea there, and give them a start?"

Mrs. Churchill's vague eye roamed for a moment, and she said, "What—where—I wasn't listening," like one in a dream.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Oxenham, "I will. I am to have some dresses fitted this morning——"

"Oh, are you going to Mrs. Earl?" cried her stepmother, suddenly alert and glowing. "Oh, Mary, dear, *would* you take a message for me? Tell her I must, I simply *must* have my pink gown to-morrow." To look at her, one would have imagined it a matter of life and death.

Half an hour later her husband and stepdaughter, two highly-finished, perfectly-tailored figures, sober and stately, severely unpretentious, yet breathing wealth and consequence at every point, set forth together through spacious gardens to the road and the tram—which appeared to the minute, as it always does for men of the Churchill stamp, who are never too soon or too late for anything. They rode together to Collins Street, and there separated and went east and west, the daughter to have her Cup dresses tried on at one end of that thoroughfare, and the father to resume command of his commercial kingdom at the other.

He had not been in his office many minutes before he sent for Joseph Liddon. When the young man appeared, neat and spruce, as became a clerk of the great house, Mr. Churchill held out the *Argus*, folded, and pointed to the advertisement of the tea-room.

"I wanted to ask you, Liddon, if this is your mother?" he said, in his quick, business way.

Joey did not need to look, but dropped his eyes to the paper, and crimsoned to the roots of his hair. For a dreadful moment he was in danger of saying, "No, sir," but was mercifully spared from the perpetration of what would have been to him and his a most disastrous lie. Then he was on the point of saying he didn't know, but had the sense to perceive that such an evasion would but make the inevitable disclosure worse; and finally braced himself to the agony of confession. He had implored the relentless Jenny not to allow their name to appear in connection with her undertaking, and lo, here it was, published to the world of supercilious fellow-clerks and magnificent proprietors. He was ready to sink into the ground with shame.

"I'm sorry to say it is, sir," he mumbled, cringing and quivering. "Quite against my wishes—I've had nothing to do with it. It's my sister—she would do it—she's a very odd girl——"

"It was your sister who insisted on returning our cheque, was it not? I remember she wrote the note that enclosed it."

"Yes, sir. She's the eldest. She's—she's very odd."

"She *is* odd," said the merchant, keenly smiling. "And I should like very much to have the honour of her acquaintance."

Joey stared, doubtful whether this was joke or earnest. And the clerk who now occupied his father's place coming in with papers, the chief bade him good-morning, and he retired, much puzzled as to how that potentate had really taken the news of his (Joey's) social downfall. And his mind resumed its effort to concoct suitable explanations for his office colleagues, when they should come and ask him whether that Mrs. Liddon was his mother—from which the summons of "the boss" had disturbed him.

Mr. Churchill's mind, bent, as it supposed, upon business, did not turn out Miss Liddon as easily as it had dismissed her brother. It was taken with the idea of a girl who would not receive money, and dared to risk her little conventional title to be a lady for the sake of making an honest living; his own business rectitude and high-mindedness qualified him to appreciate a woman of that sort—so different from the swarm of idle damsels with whom he was in daily contact, who lived for nothing but their own pleasures, and on anybody who would keep them, with no sense whatever of any responsibility in life, whose frivolities he was always denouncing, more or less, in a good-natured way, though his own dear wife was one of them. So greatly was he interested in this exception to the rule that he presently conceived the wish to go and see her, to see what she was like. He looked at the advertisement again; the place was quite close by. He looked at his watch; it was eleven o'clock. Tea and scones were about the last things he could desire at that hour, but he might try them. She had announced that they would be good, and he did not think she was the person to make a vain boast. And Mary would probably be there, to keep him in countenance. The invitation was addressed to "ladies shopping," but gentlemen were not prohibited; if there should be any difficulty on the ground of his sex he could say he had called for his daughter. No, he would tell Miss Liddon and her mother who he was, and give them the encouragement of his good wishes in their plucky enterprise. Taking down his smart brown hat, which matched his smart heather-brown suit, he stole across to Little Collins Street in search of the tea-room.

CHAPTER III

AFLOAT

It was discovered over a basket-maker's shop at the top of a rather dark staircase; a deterring approach, as Mr. Churchill reflected, but he rightly supposed they had not had much choice of premises. On reaching the room, however, he was surprised to see how nice it looked, and how very unlike a restaurant. It had been used to warehouse the basket-maker's stock, and had a spacious floor, though a rather low ceiling, and, like the staircase, was ill lighted for its present purpose. But Jenny and her mother had papered it with a yellow paper, and draped yellow muslin around, not over, the dim windows; by which means they had put light and brightness into it, as well as an air of elegance not to be expected in such a place. It was the day of art muslins, and this was very pretty art muslin, with a brownish pattern meandering through the yellow; and it had little frills at the edges, and brown bands to draw the curtains to the wall, which had a cultured look. And, although these decorations were comparatively perishable and soailable, they had cost little, and would last a considerable time, if not for ever. The floor was covered with plain brown linoleum, that looked like brown paint, and scattered in inviting groups about it were a number of low chairs and tables in brown wickerwork, supplied by the basket-maker downstairs, who had been glad to deal reasonably in this matter as in other arrangements, with a view to mutual benefits from the amalgamation of the new enterprise with his own struggling trade, hitherto crushed by the weight of central city rents. The chair bottoms were cushioned in various pretty chintzes of æsthetic hue, and each table-top furnished with a Japanese tray, containing cups and saucers and a little glass sugar-basin and milk-jug, protected by a square of muslin from the wandering fly. Heavier chairs and more solid tables, furniture from the old home, were mixed with these, and a capacious family sideboard bore a multitude of brown earthen teapots of different sizes. The whole effect of these inexpensive arrangements was soothing to the cultivated eye and the instructed mind.

"I wish I had known," said Mr. Churchill to himself, as he calculated the rough cost in one comprehensive glance. "I would have supplied them with all they wanted at first cost."

He looked for his daughter, but she was still detained by Mrs. Earl, a lady more rushed by clients than a fashionable doctor, and he found that he was the only customer of the tea-room, and the first. His heavy step stumbling on the staircase had announced his approach, and two of the proprietors received him with an anxious air. One of these, a bent-backed, immature girl with a sharp-featured face, retired to a table in a corner, where she began to sew, watching him the while; the other came forward to play the hostess with a charming dignity of mien. He did not know her, but she knew him—Joey had pointed out "the boss" to her in a hundred crowds; Mrs. Liddon, peeping from behind the screen that masked the passage to her kitchen, nervous at the approach of a lone man, knew him also, and pardonably remained in ambush to learn what he had to say. She did hope he was not one of those gay old gentlemen who were worse than the young ones in their pursuit of defenceless girls.

Jenny was looking very sweet at that moment, with the flush of excitement in her small, bright face. She had clear, straight-browed eyes, and a slightly tilted nose, and an assertive chin, which somehow combined to make a whole that nobody said was beautiful and yet everybody was attracted by; it was piquant and spirited, finely finished and full of life. Her small figure was as refined as her face, and the plain black gown and bibbed holland apron that she wore became it perfectly. She was a picture of neatness and capability as she stepped forward to receive her unexpected guest, and his business-like soul warmed towards her. Though he was not the philanderer so much dreaded by Mrs. Liddon, he admired her as a mere woman with that part of his soul which was not business-like. She looked so sincere and wholesome.

"Miss Liddon, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

They bowed to each other.

"Hm—ha—I must introduce myself—Mr. Churchill, my dear—excuse my freedom—I am not exactly a stranger—"

"Oh no, sir!"

She was violently crimson, thinking of the returned cheque; so was he, from the same cause.

"I—I—I was reading my paper this morning—I wasn't sure if it was the same—I thought it might be—and—and I owe much to your good father, my dear—his long and faithful services—a heavy loss to the firm—there, there! I beg your pardon for mentioning it—all I meant to say was that we take a great interest in his family, and I thought—I fancied perhaps—in short, my dear, I have come to congratulate you on your courage and energy. I see it all—I understand—I am a business man myself—I should have done the same in your place, though it grieved me to have it come back—it did, indeed; I was so anxious to do something. Anyway, I thought you wouldn't mind my coming to see how you were getting on—your father's old friend—and to offer you my good wishes, and whatever assistance you will honour me by accepting. Oh, not money—I know you won't have that—but advice as to buying goods, and so on—matters in which my experience might be of help to you. It would be a pleasure to me, my dear, I do assure you."

Jenny listened with heaving breast and drooping head, and tears began to well up, overflow, and fall; seeing which, the old man took her little hand and paternally patted it. Whereupon Mrs. Liddon rushed out from behind her screen.

Jenny received her with emotion—a swift whisk of a handkerchief across her eyes and an impassioned smile.

"This, mother, is Mr. Churchill. He is so good as to take an interest in our experiment. He has come to wish us success."

"Madam," said the old gentleman, who was thoroughly enjoying himself, "I am proud and happy to make your acquaintance. And let me say that success is assured to an enterprise undertaken in such a spirit and with so much good sense. I don't know when I have been so interested as in seeing this young lady—this delicate young creature"—indicating Jenny, who was as tough as perfect health and an active life could make her—"turning to, and setting her shoulder to the wheel, in this—this gallant fashion. Your husband, ma'am, was one of the best of men and gentlemen—I always knew that; but I did not know that he was so blessed in his family. I did not, indeed."

"You know his son, sir," murmured the widow, who was very proud of her handsome boy.

"Your son," said Mr. Churchill, "is very well—a very good son, I make no doubt; but he's not half the man that your daughter is. My dear, I mean that for a compliment, though it may not sound like one." He gazed at Jenny's now smiling face, and added abruptly, "It was you who wouldn't be beholden to us for a trumpery hundred pounds, wasn't it?"

She looked down, and again coloured violently.

"Ah, I see. You felt yourself grossly insulted. I am sure you did."

"Oh, no, no," the mother eagerly interposed. "Pray don't think that. We were all most grateful—indeed, we were. But Jenny said——"

"Yes, I understand. Her name is Jenny, is it? I think I can guess what Miss Jenny said. She's as proud as Lucifer—I can see that; but I honour her for it. I honour you for it, my dear. It's the sort of pride that a good many would be the better for. You are a born lady, my dear, and that's the short and the long of it."

Then he asked to be shown the premises, and the happy women took him over them, and displayed all their economical contrivances, which quite bore out his preconceptions of Jenny's excellence as a business manager and a woman. He attributed it all to Jenny, and indeed it was her hands which had made the frilled curtains and the restful chair cushions, and devised whatever was original in the commissariat arrangements. Mrs. Liddon's kitchen was her own great pride, and also her store of new-made scones, which were as light as feathers.

"You must give me some tea and scones," said Mr. Churchill, "that I may taste what they are like. I must do that, you know, before I recommend them to my friends."

"Of course," said Jenny; and she quickly arranged a table, with two scones on a plate and a tiny pat of iced butter; and her mother handed her a small, hot teapot from behind the screen.

"Earthen pots seemed sweeter than metal, for so much use," she said, placing it before him; "and we thought these trays nicer to eat from than anything else we could afford. Both are liable to break, but they were cheap."

"They would have been cheaper," he said, "if you had come to me. Mind you come to me when you want some more."

Then he ate and drank and smacked his lips, gravely, as if judging wine for experts. The women hung upon the verdict with trembling anxiety.

"Excellent," he exclaimed, "excellent! Never tasted better tea in my life—nor scones either. And butter delicious. Keep it up at this, my dear, and you'll do. I'll send everybody I know to have tea with you, if you'll only promise to keep it up. All depends on that, you know."

"I know," said Jenny. "And that we may do it, we have undertaken nothing *but* tea and scones at present. By-and-by we will have coffee, and, perhaps, cakes and other things. But at present, doing everything ourselves, we have to be careful not to get muddled—not to try more than we can do well. We can't run out of tea and scones, nor need we waste any. Mother *can* make a batch in a quarter of an hour, if necessary."

"Good," said the merchant, to whom the smallest details were important in matters of business; and he began to fumble in his pocket. "Who's the cashier?" he asked.

"I am," replied Sarah, from behind her little table, on which stood two wooden bowls and neat piles of paper tickets.

"And what's to pay?" he inquired, advancing with his hand full of loose silver.

"Sixpence," said she shyly.

"Sixpence," he repeated, with a meditative air, "sixpence; yes, that will do. Neither too much nor too little—though that's expensive tea. When you want a fresh stock of tea, Miss Jenny, let me

know, will you? Come, you needn't hesitate; I'm not offering to give it to you. I'm as much a business man as you are."

"You are very good," murmured Jenny; "and I will."

He took change for the shilling, which was his smallest coin; and then he began to think it time to return to his office, from which he had been absent nearly an hour. As he was stumbling downstairs, after warmly shaking hands with the family, he met his daughter coming up.

"What! you, Mary?" he exclaimed, for he had forgotten all about her.

"What! you, father?" she responded. "Are you here before me? That is kind of you. Oh, I'm so tired! Two frocks in one morning! But I suppose I ought to be thankful that she'll do them. Is the tea really good, father? If it is, I think I'll make my lunch here, instead of going home, and Maude can pick me up at the office when she comes in this afternoon. Telephone to her when you go back, and say so, will you, dear?"

"I will," said Mr. Churchill. "And the tea and scones are all that they profess to be. A charming little place, and people too. Come, I will introduce you before I go."

He took her in, introduced her, and left her. She stayed till nearly one o'clock, talking much as her father had done, with all his kindness and her own more dignified reserve, and rejoined him at the office, after some shopping, much impressed with Jenny. Later, Mrs. Churchill, resplendent, drove into town, and her big carriage got itself into Little Collins Street, and she was made to take tea and scones in her turn, and found them so excellent that she spent the rest of the afternoon in talking about them to her friends, and about the pretty, poky place that was so sensationally opposed to all one's ideas of a restaurant. It was the amusement of the day, and resulted in making the tea-room fashionable.

CHAPTER IV

THE HERO

The junior Churchill partner returned home next day from a six months' trip, and the house at Toorak was much excited by the event, for he was a great man in its eyes. He lived an independent life at the club and in a suite of sumptuous chambers in East Melbourne, when on this side of the world, but was received by his father and stepmother on his first arrival, and entertained until his own establishment was ready for him. His stepmother, before she was his stepmother, had badly wanted to be his wife, and it was a source of extreme satisfaction to her that he still remained unmarried and disengaged, though thirty-five last birthday, and one of the greatest catches in the colony. She never would have a pretty governess in the house, lest Anthony should be tempted; and she kept a sharp eye upon the girls who sought and sighed for him—their name was legion—when able to do so, and systematically circumvented them. He was too good, she said, to be thrown away. In other words, it would be too dreadful not to have him at dinner on Sundays, and in and out of the house all the week through, petting her (in a strictly filial manner), and escorting her about when his father was busy.

"People talk of the troubles of stepmothers," she used to say, with her most maternal air. "*I* have never had any trouble. My stepchildren never objected to me for a moment, and they are just the comfort of my life."

Of the two, Anthony was her greatest comfort; he was always there—when he was not in England. Mary Oxenham was a dear woman, but she seldom came to town.

Mary and her father went to meet the ship that brought Anthony back. Mrs. Churchill stayed at home, to put flowers into his bedroom, and be ready to welcome him on the doorstep in a twenty-guinea tea-gown, designed on purpose. The boat, they had been informed by telephone from the office, was expected at five o'clock, but when Mrs. Oxenham called for her father at half-past three, he told her it would not be in before six at the earliest; and he was in rather a state of mind lest Anthony's dinner should be spoiled. He sent a message to his wife to postpone it to half-past eight, and Mrs. Oxenham said she would kill time by going to the tea-room.

She drove thither in Maude's carriage, which had brought her in, because she thought that its appearance at the door would be good for custom. She was much interested in Miss Liddon and her praiseworthy efforts, and anxious to assist them; and she and Maude had agreed that it would be very nice if they could keep the tea-room select—a place where they could meet their friends in comfort. They thought this might be managed if they made a little effort at the start, and that, once established on those lines, the coming season would provide as much custom of the right sort as the Liddons could manage. Mrs. Oxenham desired it rather for Jenny's sake than their own; she did not like to think of that lady-like girl having to wait on rough people.

On entering the yellow room, it was evident to her that all was well, so far. Several people were taking tea and scones, and the newcomer was more or less acquainted with them all. A frisky matron whom Maude had introduced there yesterday had come again, and she had a frisky man along with her—having promptly recognised the possibilities of the new establishment as a place

for meeting one's friends. She was lounging at great ease in one of the low, cushioned chairs, with her feet crossed and her gloves in her lap, and he was sitting in another, with his arms on his knees, which touched her pretty gown; they both sat up very suddenly when Mrs. Oxenham appeared. Two other ladies, with two other gentlemen, made a group at the furthest possible distance from them; and three smart girls in another corner were letting their tea grow cold while they chaffed and were chaffed by a couple of high-collared youths, who certainly had no business to be with them in their unchaperoned condition.

"So this is the first result," said Mrs. Oxenham to herself, as she bowed slightly in response to unnecessarily cordial smiles. "Oh, well, it don't matter to her, I suppose."

"Her" was Jenny Liddon, who came forward with a glowing face, and directed her patroness to a particularly nice chair in Sarah's neighbourhood. Mrs. Oxenham sat down, and made kind inquiries of her *protégée* as to how she was getting on.

"*Beautifully*," Jenny replied with fervour, "thanks to you and Mr. Churchill. We have had quite a number of customers already—we are paying our way, even now—and they all say that the tea and scones are good."

"Get me some, dear."

Jenny flitted round the screen, and came back with the fragrant teapot and the pat of sweet butter that she was so careful to keep cool; and Mrs. Oxenham ate and drank with the enjoyment of a dainty woman accustomed to the best, and not always finding it where it should be. She talked to her young hostess as the girl passed to and fro, with the object of making her feel that she was still recognised as a lady as well as a restaurant-keeper; for Mrs. Oxenham had ideas as to the status of women, and what determined it, which were much in advance of those popularly held.

"I am on my way to meet the mail steamer," she said, rising when she had finished her tea, and looking at her watch.

"Yes," said Jenny. "My brother told me Mr. Anthony Churchill was expected." She added with a little sigh, "The sea will be looking lovely now."

"You ought to get down to it when you can," said Mrs. Oxenham. "The air in this street is not very wholesome. You should have a blow on the St. Kilda pier of a night, when work is over."

"By-and-by," said Jenny, "when we can afford it, we will have a little home there, and come in and out by tram. At present we do not spend a penny more than is quite necessary. We walk to the house where we sleep, and back. We just keep a room to sleep in; our landlady at this place is a fixture, and takes charge in our absence. But we live here."

"Not wholly on tea and scones, I hope?"

"No," smiled Jenny. "Mother sees to that."

"You must take care to play no tricks with your health. Mind that."

"I am as careful as I can be, Mrs. Oxenham."

"Take my advice, and don't grudge sixpence for a blow on the pier; it will be the most paying investment of all, you'll find. Where's your brother? What does he do for you?"

Jenny blushed slightly. "There's nothing he wouldn't do for us if we would let him," she said. "But we won't allow him to cripple himself."

"Does he live with you?"

"Not now. He has taken lodgings for himself."

"He doesn't approve of the tea-room, does he?"

Jenny blushed a deeper hue. "He is only a boy," she murmured indulgently. "He doesn't understand. He will some day."

She saw some of her customers make a movement to rise, and Mrs. Oxenham smiled farewell and departed, glad to be blocked on the dark staircase by new people coming up.

"Brave little creature!" was her inward ejaculation, as she stepped into her carriage, which seemed to block the narrow street. "I see what she has had to fight against. Ah, well, women are not all talking dolls, as Tony calls them. I wonder what Tony will say to her?" She paused to consider, and thought it would be as well not to take Tony there. "I hate to see all those men lounging about on her little chairs," she said to herself. "They are not meant for men. I do hope and trust they won't any of them take it into their empty heads to make love to her. She is not exactly pretty, but she is very attractive—dreadfully attractive, for such a place. She doesn't know it in the least, but she has a face that one can hardly take one's eyes off."

The carriage clattered up to the door of the palatial business premises of Churchill & Son, and the chief stepped out with the alertness of a young man.

"It's early," he said, "but we may as well catch the 4.30. Better be too soon than too late."

Mrs. Oxenham agreed, and they were driven to the neighbouring station, where they bade the coachman return to meet the special, and took train for Williamstown. Arrived there, the old gentleman buttoned his great-coat and helped his daughter into a sealskin mantle; and they prepared for a long pacing up and down the breezy pier, between the rails and trucks, while they waited for Tony. But in half an hour the ship appeared, and for another half hour, while she was being warped into her place, they had the bliss of seeing the dear fellow, though they could not reach him, and of hearing the beloved voice shouting greetings and questions at them. Amongst the swarm of passengers hanging over the rails, Anthony Churchill, with his red beard on a level with the hats of ordinary men, was easily distinguishable. He was a fine man, and a handsome one, as well as amiable and rich; so it was no wonder that the girls, of whom there seem such a terrible number in proportion to their possible suitors, ran after him.

"How well he looks!" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenham—meaning how beautiful and distinguished, compared with other women's brothers.

"Splendid!" said the father proudly.

Then the gangways were fixed, and he came hurling down through the ascending and descending crowd, and the majestic woman put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

They climbed into the special, and sat there and talked till it filled up and was ready to start. They wanted to know what was doing, and how everybody was. Anthony inquired after "Mother," as he facetiously called her, and his father and sister after that young lady for whom he had been searching so long. For they had a desire to see him settled with a nice wife, and bringing up sons and daughters, though Maude had not.

"I have not found her yet," the young man confessed. "I suppose I am hard to please, but I don't seem to have met anybody with enough in her to make it worth while to go so far as matrimony."

"What should she have in her?" asked Mrs. Oxenham, smiling.

"What you have in you, Polly," he replied. "Some sense. Some ideas beyond dressing and smirking at men."

"Oh, well, you had better put yourself in my hands," said she. "As I know there are plenty of such women, I'll undertake to find you one."

"Thanks; but I'd rather find her for myself."

"A man never finds a woman of that sort. He doesn't know her when he sees her. He doesn't know *any* woman when he sees her. You leave it to me, Tony. Time is getting on, and we can't allow you to degenerate into a selfish old club bachelor, thinking of nothing but your dinner. I shall begin at once. I know what would suit you far better than you can know yourself."

The wild idea that Jenny Liddon would suit him never crossed her mind for a moment, as a matter of course.

It was not quite seven o'clock when they reached town, and they got home to Toorak before it was time to dress for dinner. As the carriage rolled up to the door, Mrs. Churchill swam into the hall, with her fine laces foaming about her, and cast herself into her stepson's arms, as she was lawfully privileged to do.

"Well, mother," he cried gaily, as he kissed her curly-fringed brow—a thing he never did unless she made him—"and how's your little self? And how are the brats?"

The brats came headlong downstairs, and flung themselves upon him from all sides at once.

"Oh, Tony! Tony! We are so glad you are back, dear Tony! What have you brought us, Tony?"

CHAPTER V

HE MEETS THE HEROINE

"Polly, come and have a look round, and give me your advice, will you? My fellow says he's got all the luggage up, and he wants to know where to put some of the new things."

Mr. Anthony Churchill would have felt himself insulted if you had called his "fellow" a valet. Australian gentlemen don't keep valets. The person in question had certainly filled that office in England, where his master had picked him up, but was now merely a sort of private male housemaid of superior quality, who waited on his employer in the East Melbourne chambers, and made him more comfortable than anybody else could have done. When he was away travelling, Maude took on his servant as an extra footman, in order to guard him against the seductions of other wealthy bachelors who were known to covet him; but when Tony was at home, Jarvis was his indispensable attendant. Mary Oxenham used to say that Jarvis was the main cause of that celibacy which she could not but deplore in a man of thirty-five, who could so well afford a wife and family.

"Yes, dear," she said, in response to his proposal; "I shall be delighted." She rose from the Toorak

luncheon-table to dress for the expedition.

"Oh, Tony, you are *not* going away?" cried Mrs. Churchill, prettily aghast. "When I have hardly had a word with you! And when you know it is my day at home, and I can't come with you! Mary, it's very nasty and selfish of you, to carry him off and keep him all to yourself—especially when he has been in town the whole morning."

"I'll come back to dinner," he said soothingly. "And we'll have a game of billiards together in the evening, if you like."

"But I want you *now*, Tony! All the world is coming this afternoon, just on purpose to see you, and I did so want to show you off."

"The very reason, madam, why I go. I don't like being shown off."

"But you know what I mean, Tony—you can do exactly what you like—go away and smoke, or anything. And there are several new girls—pretty girls—whom you haven't seen before."

"Pretty girls have ceased to interest me very much. I've seen such a lot of them."

"You are a nasty, horrid, disagreeable boy! I suppose *I* have ceased to interest you—that's what you'd like to say if you weren't too polite."

"I'd cut my tongue out before I'd say such a thing."

He smiled down upon her, strong, calm, amused, indifferent, as if she were a kitten frisking. He was always interested in her, if only because he had to be always on his guard to keep her from making a fool of herself. She looked up at him, with a pout and a laugh, and proceeded to make hay while the sun shone—to make the most of the little time that Mary gave her for the enjoyment of his company.

Brother and sister departed as soon as the latter was ready, preferring the homely tram to the carriage that Mrs. Churchill desired to order for them; and spent a quiet hour together in Tony's chambers, where Jarvis had left nothing to find fault with. There were pictures for Mrs. Oxenham to see, and a multitude of pretty things that Tony had brought out to adorn his rooms, or as presents for his friends; and these were very interesting to a lady of modern culture, as she was, secretly proud of and confident in her discriminating artistic sense. And she much enjoyed an uninterrupted gossip with her brother, he and she having been close comrades for many years before Maude was heard of. They had a great deal to say that they didn't care to say when she was present.

Jarvis offered tea, but it was declined. "No, thank you," said Mary. "There's a little place where I make a point of having tea whenever I am in town—kept by some people whom I am interested in. And it isn't good for me to drink too much. I think, Tony, I'll be going, as I have a commission to do for Maude."

"I'll go with you," said Tony, "if you'll just let me finish my pipe. It's the sweetest pipe I have had for a long time. After all"—with a luxurious sigh—"there's no place like home."

"Don't call *this* a home," his sister retorted.

He cast a complacent eye around the handsome room, which had witnessed so many masculine symposiums. "I might go further and fare worse," he said, with a comfortable laugh. "Do you remember the man in *Punch* who didn't marry because he was so domesticated? I think I am like him. I love a quiet life. I like my armchair and my fireside of an evening." He puffed meditatively, while Mary drew on her gloves. "What's your errand for Maude?" he asked abruptly.

"She wants me to tell Mrs. Earl something."

"I could have sworn it. Now, if I had a wife who thought of nothing but her clothes——"

"Who *wants* you to have a wife who thinks of nothing but her clothes? Do you suppose they are all Maudes? Come along, and don't aggravate me."

He heaved himself out of his deep chair, retired to take off his smoking-jacket, and escorted her to the tram and to Collins Street.

"If you are going to be long," he said, at Mrs. Earl's door, "I'll look into the club for a few minutes."

"I'm not going to be a second, but don't wait for me," she answered, "Go to your club, old fogey, but be home in good time for dinner."

However, when she had done her errand, which was only to deliver an urgent message concerning the trimming of a Cup gown—to which Mrs. Earl was not likely to pay the least attention, knowing her business better than any lady could teach her—there was Tony on the pavement, still in devoted attendance.

"Where do you want to go now, Polly?" he asked, as if clubs were nothing to him.

"Oh, nowhere—except just to get my tea. Don't wait, dear boy."

"Where do you go for your tea?"

"To a room in Little Collins Street."

"What an extraordinary place to have one's tea in!" He signalled for a hansom. "I'll go with you."

"Oh, no; don't you bother. It's not a place for men."

"I'll take you to the door, at any rate."

He took her to the door, and the outside of the basket-maker's premises made him curious to see the inside, and he begged to be allowed to escort her upstairs. "If only to see that you are not robbed and murdered," he said.

"No fear of that," she returned, laughing. "You go and amuse yourself at the club. This is a ladies' place."

"Men prohibited?"

"Not prohibited, but they don't want them."

"All right. I'll leave the cab for you."

He went to his club, and she to her tea and scones (the room was satisfactorily full, and Jenny too busy to be talked to); and they met again at Toorak in time to entertain Maude for half an hour before she had to dress.

Next day Maude was determined to have her stepson for herself—especially as there was a dark rumour that he was going to desert her the day after for the superior attractions of Jarvis and his bachelor abode; and Anthony was quite willing to gratify her. Recognising that she would be *de trop*, Mary Oxenham chose to stay at home and amuse the children; and he and his pretty stepmother (seven years his junior) drove away after luncheon for the ostensible purpose of paying calls together.

They paid two calls, and then, being in East Melbourne, Maude proposed that they should go and have some tea.

"What!" exclaimed Tony. "Haven't you had enough tea for one afternoon?"

"It was horribly bad tea," said she, "and I know a place where you can get it exceptionally good. I am just dying for a cup."

"Where is your place?"

"In Little Collins Street. The funniest place you ever saw."

"Why, that must be the place Mary wouldn't take me to yesterday. She said men were not admitted."

"Oh, what a story!"

"Well, she said the people there didn't want them."

"Stuff! Of course they do. Didn't you hear Mrs. Bullivant say she was there yesterday with Captain what's-his-name, that charming new A.D.C.? No, you were flirting with Miss Baxter—oh, I saw you!—and had no eyes or ears for anybody else."

"Then I presume I may accompany you, and have some tea too?"

"Of course you may. You'll be charmed—everybody is. There are dear little chairs, in which you can actually rest yourself, and tables so high"—spreading her hand on a level with her knee. "And it's awfully retired and peaceful, if you want to talk. I only hope"—regardless of her previous efforts to compass that end—"that it won't get too well known. That would spoil it."

Anthony stalked through the basket-maker's shop (that customers passed that way, in view of his wares, was a consideration that largely affected the rent, to Mrs. Liddon's advantage), and knocked his head and his elbows on the dark staircase, and thought it was indeed the funniest place of its kind that he had ever seen. But when he reached the tea-room, and looked round with his cultured eyes upon its singular appointments, he was quite as charmed as Maude had expected him to be, and more surprised than charmed.

"How very extraordinary!" he ejaculated. "What an oasis in the howling desert of Little Collins Street!"

"Yes, isn't it?" returned Maude, jerking her head from side to side. "I knew you would like it. But, oh, do look how full it is! How tiresome of people to come flocking here, as if there were no other place in the whole town! There's hardly a table left. Oh, here's one! I'll get that girl to put it in the corner yonder. She knows me."

"It will do here," said Anthony, with a little peremptory air that she was quite accustomed to. "Sit down."

He dropped himself into a basket-chair, and it creaked ominously.

"What a very extraordinary place!" he repeated, as his stepmother drew off her gloves in preparation for prolonged repose and conversation. Then, as Jenny advanced, blushing a little—for she knew this was the junior partner, and he stared at her intently—"What a very—" He left

that sentence unfinished.

"Tea and scones for two, if you please. Yes, she's quite a new type, isn't she?—like her tea-room. She's the daughter of old Liddon, who used to be in the office, and who was killed by being run over on the railway the other day. Mary says she's quite well educated."

"What!" cried Anthony. He sat bolt upright in his chair. "Old Liddon dead! Good heavens! And his daughter keeping a restaurant! Why, I thought they rather prided themselves on being gentlefolks. The old man used to tell me he was an Eton boy—quite true, too."

"He married his cook," said Mrs. Churchill—which was a libel, for poor old Mrs. Liddon's family was as "genteel" as her own—"and I suppose the girl takes after her. Mrs. Liddon's cooking talents are now exercised on the tea and scones that they sell here, and they do her credit, as you will see. I'm sure I wish to goodness I could find a good cook!"

"If that is Miss Liddon," said Anthony, who was watching the screen for her reappearance, "I think I ought to speak to her."

"Oh, no, you oughtn't, Tony. It would never do. Mary doesn't want men to talk to her. Mary is taking a great interest in her, you must know, and she'd like to keep men out of the room altogether—only she doesn't want to hinder custom—just for Miss Liddon's sake, for fear she should be taken liberties with, or annoyed in any way, as if she were a common waitress."

This was a very injudicious speech, but then Maude was nearly always injudicious.

"I don't annoy women," said her stepson severely; "and I am not 'men.' I am a partner of the firm that has lost her father's services—if we have lost them."

"Oh, yes; he was killed on the spot—all smashed to little bits."

"I would merely say a word—of sympathy, you know."

"Don't do it, Tony; it would be most improper. If you attempt to scrape acquaintance with her I'll never bring you here again. Mary would blame me, and make a dreadful fuss."

"Mary is so much in the habit of making a fuss, isn't she?"

"I assure you she would. You see she wouldn't let you come yesterday. You can make your condolences to the brother in the office."

So Anthony did not say anything to Miss Liddon, except "Thank you," in a very gentle tone. As she approached with the tea and scones, he rose and stood—her little head was not much above his elbow—and he took the tray from her hands. The unwonted courtesy brought a flush to Jenny's pale cheeks—they were pale with the weariness of being on her feet all day—and Mrs. Churchill had her first suspicion that the young person was pretty. She determined that she would not bring Tony to the tea-room again.

Nevertheless, being there, and very comfortable, she would have sat on with him indefinitely, had he allowed it; but he would not allow it. Her meal finished, she was taking the place and time of paying clients, as several others were doing, causing Jenny to wonder if she had not made a mistake in providing cushioned chairs. He proposed to call at the office for his father, and drive the old gentleman home—an attention from his charming wife that always gratified him; and Maude did not see her way to object. They returned to Toorak quite early, and Tony lit a pipe and went off with his sister for a saunter in the shrubberies (to get the history of the Liddons up to date), while his stepmother was hastily getting into a yellow satin tea-gown with a view to an ante-dinner *tête-à-tête* on her own account.

CHAPTER VI

THE INEVITABLE ENSUES

Yes! The world became a changed place to Jenny Liddon from the moment when Anthony Churchill stood up to take her tray, and to say "Thank you" in that indescribably feeling voice. That very moment it was, and she never marked it in her calendar.

"The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!"

Very seldom do we hear the bell. And therefore we are not really so silly as we seem. Jenny was quite unaware that she had fallen in love as suddenly as you would fall downstairs if you did not look where you were going; being the most proper little heroine that ever lived in a proper family story the idea of such a thing would have covered her with shame. Oh, she would have died sooner than so forget herself! She was merely conscious of some new, sweet scent in the atmosphere of life, some light ether in the brain, some—but what's the use of trying to describe what everybody understands already?

When the hero had ceased to watch her out of the corner of his eye, had vacated his basket-chair and vanished from the scene, the tea-room became a place of dreams, and not a place of

business. She took the orders of customers with an empty, far-away, idiotic smile; she drifted about with plates and teapots like an active sleep-walker. Oh, how handsome he was! How big and strong! How considerate and kind! What perfect courtesy—taking her tray from her, and thanking her in that way, as if she were a condescending queen! How thoroughly one's ideal of a gentleman and a man! These impassioned thoughts absorbed her.

She went down to St. Kilda in the evening, and sat upon the pier. It was absolutely necessary to have the sea to commune with, under the circumstances—darkness and the sea.

"You're tired, duckie," the old mother said, aware of a difference and vaguely anxious. "Oh, don't deny it—I can see you are quite done up."

"My legs do ache," the girl confessed, with a tear and a trembling lip and an ecstatic smile. "Running after so many customers. I am not going to complain of that. Let me sit here and rest, while you and Sarah walk up and down. *Your* legs want stretching."

They thought not, but she was sure of it. "Go, go, dears—*do* go; I am all right—I am quite happy by myself—I *like* it!"

They wrapped her up and left her; and while they perambulated the pleasant platform, talking of their commercial successes, and how dear Joey would come round when he heard of them, she sat quite still and stared at the sea. It murmured musically in the cold, clear night, full of sympathy for her.

All at once she seemed to catch an inkling of the truth. She turned hot and cold, sat bolt upright and shook herself, and inwardly exclaimed, with a gust of rage, "Oh, what a *fool* I am!" then walked home briskly to give renewed attention to business.

Business prospered as well as heart could wish. The little push given by the powerful Churchill family to her humble enterprise, without which it might have struggled and languished like so many worthy enterprises, floated it into fashion within a week; and, though she had plenty of hard work, insomuch that the basket-maker's wife's niece had to be hired to wash cups and saucers and hand the teapots round the screen, all anxiety as to income was set at rest. Nothing remained to make the tea-room a sound concern but to "keep it up" as it had begun; and she and her mother were resolute to do that. Not a pot of ill-made tea nor a defective scone was ever placed before a customer by those conscientious tradeswomen. Mrs. Liddon, who was happily of a tough and active constitution, laboured to sift her fine flour and test the temperature of her oven, as if each batch of scones was to compete for a prize in an agricultural show. They were not large, substantial scones, like those of the common restaurant, but no bigger than the top of a wineglass, and of a marvellous puffy lightness. She never made more than an ovenful at a time, mixing and cutting one batch while the previous one was baking; and this rapid treatment of the dough, with her previous elaborate siftings, and a leavening of her own composition, produced the perfect article for which she became justly famous. Two scones were put before each customer, and if only one was eaten the other was not wasted. Churchill & Son soon began to provide the tea, which was of the best quality, at a price no storekeeper could buy it for; and the very boiling of the water was watched and regulated, that the freshness should not boil out of it before it was used. The principle on which this establishment was conducted was to do little, and to do that little well—an admirable system, too rarely observed in the commercial world; but, as Jenny had not unjustly boasted, she had the instincts of a good woman of business in her. She resisted all her mother's pleadings for coffee and cakes, when the number of customers seemed to call for larger transactions. Coffee and tea, she said, would be too much upon their minds (since coffee as well as tea must be absolutely perfect), and cakes could be bought anywhere. Let them be content to know, and have it known, that for tea and scones that were always good they were to be invariably depended on. So Mrs. Liddon sifted and baked till eleven in the morning, while Sarah prepared the trays and Jenny washed the tea-room floor; and then the latter, having tidied her dainty person, trotted about with hardly a pause till seven at night, while the bent-backed sister received the little stream of coin that steadily poured in, and dreamed all day of growing rich enough to go to Europe and do things.

Jenny had no fears about the success of her undertaking; it seemed almost too successful sometimes, when her back was aching and her legs too tired to carry her; but she had one constant and ever-increasing anxiety, which beset her every morning, after keeping her more or less awake through the night. This was lest Mr. Anthony Churchill should not come to the tea-room during the day.

His stepmother never took him again, after the first visit; and she herself lost interest in the place, which had been but the fad of an hour or two. She could get a cup of tea whenever she wanted, without paying for it, or putting herself out of the way; and the Little Collins Street premises were very stuffy as the summer came on. They were too crowded for comfort—*i.e.*, for a sentimental *tête-à-tête*; and the girl was too good-looking to expose Tony to, with his absurd ideas of her being a lady. So Mrs. Churchill gave the tea-room up.

Tony, however, did not give it up. Several days elapsed between his first visit and the second, because it was so difficult to go and sit down there and ask Miss Liddon to wait on him. He quite agreed with Mary that men should not be admitted. A girl like that, brought up as she had been, ought not to be at the beck and call of those coarse creatures. Nevertheless, as men did go, he wanted to be one of them. As representing the firm with which her father had been so closely and for so long connected, it was only right that he should keep an eye on her, and lend her a helping

hand if she seemed to need it.

He said nothing of his purpose to Mrs. Oxenham, who continued to refresh herself with the admirable tea and scones at hours that could be fairly calculated upon and avoided. The first she heard of his having gone to the tea-room on his own account was from her little half-sisters, who did not happen to mention it to their mother. These children were much attached to him, and he to them, and one day he took them to the Royal Park, and treated them to tea and scones on their way home. He thought scones were better for them than sweets, he said, and he was able to get them milk instead of tea. Mary commended him for his fatherly care of their digestions, and thought no more of the matter.

The fact was that he had given the small creatures an outing on purpose that they might introduce him to the tea-room. It seemed so much easier to appear before Miss Liddon on their behalf than on his own, and their presence was calculated to attract that notice and interest which he did not imagine he would receive for his own sake. He was not desperately anxious to see Miss Liddon, but he was curious. What he had seen of her, and what Mary and his father had told him (particularly about the hundred pounds that had been offered and refused), had struck his fancy; that was all—at present.

When he appeared at the door of the yellow chamber, with a Liberty-sashed, granny-bonneted mite clinging to either hand, Jenny saw him at once, and experienced that strange shock of leaping blood which makes heart shake and eyes dim for an ecstatic moment—such as we all understand much better than we can describe it. For days she had been aching for a sight of him, despite her savage mortification that it should be so; and here he was at last in the charming guise of a man loving and caring for little children, which, as every woman knows, is a guarantee of goodness that never proves false.

It was after six o'clock, when people were thinking of dinner rather than tea—when little Grace and Geraldine should have been on their way to Toorak, where their nursery meal awaited them—and the tea-room crowd had thinned to half a dozen, all of whom had their plates and brown pots beside them. This also he had in a measure anticipated. Jenny was free, and came forward a step or two to meet him, glancing at the children with a soft, maternal look, as it seemed to him.

"I hope these little people will not be troublesome," he said, bowing with his best politeness. "They have been to see the lions and tigers fed, and I think it has made them hungry."

"Oh, yes," said Jenny flutteringly. "I will get them some scones—not quite the newest ones. And—and don't you think they are too young for tea? May I get them some milk instead?"

"Thank you—thank you very much—if you are sure you can spare it. I daresay it would be better for them."

"I am sure it would, and we have plenty. It is very good milk."

She set the children into chairs, took off their smart bonnets, tucked napkins (napkins were kept for occasions, though not for general use) round their little chins, and put two scones into their hands; Anthony watching her with eyes that she felt piercing like two gimlets through the back of her head. He was noticing what fine, bright hair she had, and what delicate skin, and remembering that her father had been an Eton boy.

"I am awfully sorry to give you so much trouble," he mumbled.

"It is no trouble at all," she replied. "Now I will get them some milk." She dared to glance up at him. "You, sir—will you have some tea for yourself?"

"Oh, if you please—if it won't be troubling you. It's such perfectly delicious tea."

Jenny danced off—trying not to dance—and was back in a twinkling, with the tray in her arms. Her trays were light, and did not drag her into ungraceful attitudes, but he objected to see her carrying one for him. As before, he took it from her! and the little courtesy made her cheeks flush and her heart swell.

"Only he," she said to herself, "would do that."

And he would not sit to drink his tea, while she stood by, as she did, to wait upon the children—to see that they didn't butter their sashes and slop milk down their frocks; and under the circumstances it was impossible not to talk to her.

"Will you allow me to introduce myself?" he ventured to say, during a pause in her ministrations, when she seemed uncertain whether to go or stay. "I am Anthony Churchill—of the firm, you know. I hope I am not taking a liberty, but your father was such an old friend. I grieve indeed to hear—I knew nothing about it when I came the other day—"

Jenny flushed and fluttered, and, because she was physically weary, could not bear to be reminded of her father, who used to take such tender care of her. For an instant her eyes glistened, warning him to hurry from the subject.

"I think it is so brave of you to do what you are doing. My sister has been telling me about it."

"Oh, thank you—but my mother and sister do more than I do, in proportion to their strength. My sister is delicate; I'm afraid it is not good for her to sit here all day." After a pause, she added, "Mrs. Oxenham has been very, very kind to me; your father too."

"I am sure they were only too glad, if they had the chance. I wish—I wish I were privileged to be some help."

"Oh, thank you! The only help we wish for is for people to come and drink our tea, and show themselves satisfied with it."

"May I come and drink it sometimes? I feel as if men were out of place here; I am sure you would rather not have them—but I am a very quiet fellow, and I have a woman's passion for tea." He had nothing of the sort, but that didn't matter.

"Anyone has a right to come who chooses," she answered, turning from him to attend to little Grace.

The words were discouraging, but he thought the tone was not; and he determined to come again, and alone, at the earliest opportunity.

CHAPTER VII

THERE ARE SUCH WOMEN IN THE WORLD

Duly carrying out his intention on the very next day, Anthony was annoyed to find the room full, and Jenny flitting hither and thither like the choice butterfly that defies the collector's net. More than that, the basket-maker's wife, who was acquiring an ever-deepening interest in the restaurant business, was being initiated into the art of serving customers, in preparation for the expected crush of race time; and this unattractive person it was who brought him his tea and scone.

Very sedately he sat in the chair that looked best able to bear his weight until his tray was placed beside him, and it became evident that he was to get no satisfaction out of Jenny beyond that of looking at her. He looked at her for some minutes with an interest that surprised himself, and she was conscious of the direction of his eyes, and of every turn of his head, as if she had herself a hundred eyes to watch him. Then he quietly took up cup and plate, and passed over to Sarah's table. Sarah's table was a common, four-legged cedar affair, with an æsthetic cloth on it, and bore only her money bowls and the needlework that she was accustomed to occupy herself with at odd moments. It stood in a retired corner, partly sheltered by the screen.

"Do you mind if I sit here with you?" he said pleasantly—with proper respect, of course, but not with the deference she had noted in his attitude to Jenny. "I feel so out of it, with no lady to excuse my presence, monopolising one of those pretty little tables that were never meant for such as me."

Now Sarah was a child in years, but she was old in novel-reading and like exercises of the mind; and she had already cast a hungry eye upon Mr. Anthony Churchill and her sister, scenting a possible romance before a thought of such a thing had occurred to either of them. During their interview on the previous afternoon she had observed them with quite a passionate interest; and all through the night she had listened to Jenny's restless movements in her adjoining bed, like a careful doctor noting the symptoms of incipient fever. She had been all day watching for his return to the tea-room, as for a potential lover of her own—lovers, she knew, were not for her—abandoning her dreams of European travel to build gorgeous air-castles on Jenny's behalf. "If *this* should be the result of keeping a restaurant—oh, if *this* should be the reward of her goodness and courage, and all her hard work!" she sighed to herself, in an ecstasy of exultation. "Oh, if he should marry her, and make a great lady of her—as she deserves to be—what would Joey say to the tea-room *then*?"

So, when Mr. Churchill presented himself, he found no difficulty in making friends with her. She swept her work-basket from the table, to give him room for his cup and plate, and responded to his advances with a ready self-possession that surprised him in a girl so young; for Sarah, undersized and crippled, did not look her age by several years. For herself she would have been shy and awkward, but for Jenny she was bold enough. She had determined that, if she could help to bring about the realisation of her new dream, her best wits should not be wanting.

He soon began to speak of Jenny.

"Your sister seems very busy," he said, with a lightness of tone that did not deceive the listener.

"Yes; too busy. She gets very tired at night sometimes."

"I am afraid so. She has not been used to so much running about."

"No. She never expected to have so many customers. I am sorry now that we did not open for the afternoon only; it would have been quite enough for her."

"I suppose the afternoon is the busiest time?"

"Oh, yes. There are very few in the morning. Sometimes she is able to sit down and sew for a few minutes."

Mr. Churchill made a mental note of that. "I should have thought she had enough to do at the slackest time without doing sewing," he said, watching the flitting figure furtively.

"Oh, she must be doing something; she is never idle. She makes her own dresses always—and the most of ours."

"You don't say so!" He stared at Jenny boldly now. "Do you mean to say she made that one that she's got on?"

"Certainly. And it looks all right, doesn't it?"

"Mrs. Earl couldn't beat her," he said absurdly; and he really thought so, not knowing anything about it, except that Jenny's frock was simple and neat—a style that men are always partial to. "But then Mrs. Earl doesn't often get such a figure to fit, does she?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Plenty of them."

"I am sure she doesn't. It's so very graceful and—and high-bred, you know. Nobody but a lady could move and turn as she does. I hope you don't think I'm very impertinent to make these remarks."

"Oh, no," laughed Sarah, who glowed with satisfaction. "I like to hear her praised. To me she's the best and dearest person in the world. I don't think there is anybody like her."

"Well, there can't be many like her," said Anthony, seriously reflecting upon the girl's energy and high-mindedness.

Jenny was quite aware that she was being talked of, and presently she approached them, flushed, bright-eyed, vividly charming, as she had never been in the days before Mr. Anthony appeared. He rose at once, and stood while she asked him whether he had been properly attended to.

"Yes, thank you," he replied; and Sarah noticed his change of tone. "I have been taking the liberty of making myself acquainted with your sister."

Jenny laid a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "You are very kind," she said. "I'm afraid she is a bit dull and lonely in this corner by herself all day."

"The kindness has been the other way," said he, but was grateful that she otherwise regarded it, perceiving a future advantage to himself therein. "I fear you are tired, Miss Liddon."

"Not a bit," she said—and said truly—for his presence had filled body and soul with life. "And if I am, it's a pleasant way of getting tired."

"You must not over-exert yourself," he urged, with a serious solicitude that thrilled her. "What profiteth it to gain custom and lose your health?"

"That's what I am always telling her," said Sarah.

"My health is excellent," Jenny said, smiling happily. "And we are taking our landlady into the firm, you see, with a view to contingencies."

"Yes, I was so glad to see that. It would take twenty of her to do what you do, but still it's something; and she'll get more alert in time, I hope. If necessary, you must take in still more helpers, Miss Liddon—*anything*, rather than overstrain yourself and break down. You must see to that"—turning to Sarah; "you must make her take care of herself. And if she won't, report her to me, and I'll bring my father to bear upon her. He looks on her as his special charge, I know."

As they were standing apart from the tea-drinkers, and as it were in private life, he held out his hand in farewell, bending his tall head in a most courteous bow. He could not sit down again, after getting up, his own tea and scone being disposed of, and thought it wise to resist his strong desire to linger.

Being still afraid of taking liberties, he kept away from the tea-room for a day or two, taking his pleasures in other walks of life. Then the spirit moved him to return thither, and he chose the morning for his visit, when Jenny might be finding time to sit down to sew. Busy little bee! What a contrast to the girls who courted him at Maude's tennis and theatre parties—girls who appeared to have no motive or purpose in the world beyond stalking husbands, and bringing them down, if possible, by fair means or foul—women whose brains and hands seemed never to be nobly exercised. He found himself continually drawing comparisons, to their disadvantage.

Since it was obviously impossible that a man could want tea and scones in the morning, he had to invent another excuse for going to see Miss Liddon at that time of day, and the happy thought occurred to him of taking some flowers to Sarah. He selected from Paton's beautiful window a wisp of moss and ferns and lilies of the valley, which was the choicest thing he could see there, hid it in his hansom as he went through the street, and carried it with some shamefacedness to the table of the money-changer, where the two sisters were sitting together, awaiting customers.

"Good morning, Miss Liddon. Don't get up. I have not come for tea this time. It just struck me that it would refresh Miss Sarah, sitting here all day, if she had a flower to look at." And he presented his bouquet to the crippled girl, pretending that Jenny had nothing to do with it.

"Oh!" she breathed deeply. "How good! How lovely!" And, "Oh, oh—h!" cried Sarah simultaneously. They smelt the flowers in ecstasy, and Jenny ran to draw a tumbler of water from

her big filter.

"It's only rubbish," he mumbled disparagingly, "but it's sweet. I'm awfully fond of the smell of lilies of the valley myself."

"So am I," said Sarah. "And I don't know how to thank you."

"Oh, it's nothing! I just thought you might like it, don't you know. It seemed a weary thing for you to sit here for hours, with nothing but the money-boxes to look at."

He opened and shut his watch. Jenny was standing beside him, visible palpitating, touching the white bells with the tips of her fingers, saying nothing. There was a sound of footsteps and rustlings on the stairs. It was impossible to prolong the interview.

"Well, good-bye," he said suddenly, extending his hand. "I must go back to work."

As he plunged down the dark stairs into the narrow street his heart was beating in quite a new style, and he was distinctly aware of it. "Little bit of a hand!" he said to himself, opening and shutting his own broad palm, that had just swallowed it as if it had been a baby's. "Little mite of a creature! I could crush her between my finger and thumb—and she's got the pluck of a whole army of men like me. I used to think there were no such women in the world nowadays; but there are—there are, after all. Little wisp of a thing! I could take her up in my arms and carry her on my shoulder as easily as I do the children. I wish to Heaven I *could* carry her—out of that beastly place, which will kill her when the summer comes. Hullo! If I don't look out, I shall be falling in love before I know where I am. And with a restaurant-keeper, of all people! A pretty kettle of fish that would be!"

CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

He turned into Collins Street, and made his way back to his office, still musing in this dangerous fashion: "What a housekeeper she would make! What a mother! What a pride she'd take in her home! Those other girls, once they'd got a house, would let it take care of itself, and their husbands too, while they ruffled about, like peacocks in the sun, and entertained themselves with Platonic love affairs. As long as there was a useful person to pay the bills they wouldn't bother their heads about the butcher and baker. Oh, I know them! But *she's* not that sort. She wouldn't take our money, honest money as it was—she wouldn't be beholden to anybody—brave little thing! And such a ridiculous mite as it is, to go and do battle with the world for independence!"

Passing through a small army of busy clerks, his eye lit on Joey, who was regarding him with the veneration due from a mortal to an Olympian god.

"Oh, Liddon—you are Liddon, aren't you?—how are you getting on?" he demanded suddenly.

"Very well, sir, thank you. I believe I am giving every satisfaction," said Joey, with his young complacency.

Anthony regarded him for a moment in deep thought, and then asked him how long he had been in the firm's employ.

"About two years," said Joey.

"And what's your salary?"

"A hundred and thirty, sir."

"Oh, well, I must make inquiries, and see if it isn't getting time to be thinking of a rise." Nobody had thought of a rise for poor Liddon, senior, who had been worth a dozen of this boy. "And how is your mother getting on with the—the little business she has entered into?"

"I hardly know," said Joey, with a blush and a stammer. "I don't see very much of them now."

"Why not?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. Somehow I can't take to the tea-room scheme. I can't bear to see my mother and sisters doing that sort of thing, when our family has never been connected with trade in any way."

"Don't despise trade, young man. You are connected with it yourself—and not at all to your disadvantage, it strikes me—as your father was before you."

"Yes, sir; but this is a very different sort of thing, and my father, as you may have heard, sir, was an Eton boy."

"I have heard so. Well, you follow in your father's steps, my lad, and do your duty as well as he did. And your first duty is to look after your womenkind, and save them in every way you can. Out of office hours you could do a great deal for them, couldn't you?"

"I'm sure," complained Joey aggrievedly, "I'm ready to do anything—only Jenny won't let me. She will manage and control things, as if she were the head of the family. She would go into this low tea-room business in spite of all I could say. However"—drawing himself up—"I hope it won't be very long before she is in a different position."

A stinging thought flashed into Mr. Churchill's mind, and changed his amused smile into an anxious frown. "Do you mean by marriage?" he asked; saying to himself that she was just the woman to take up with a loafing vagabond, who would live upon her at his ease, while she worked to support him.

"No, sir. But my father's uncle, who is a great age, is rich, and we expect to come in for some of his property when he dies."

"Oh!" in an accent of relief. "I wouldn't advise you to count on any contingencies of that sort. Just stick to business, and depend on your own exertions—as your sister does. Take pattern by her, and you won't go far wrong."

Joey looked at his young chief with a new expression.

"Do you know my sister?" he inquired.

"I know *of* her," said Anthony warily. "My father and Mrs. Churchill, and my sister, Mrs. Oxenham, have taken a great interest in the tea-room ever since it was first opened; I have heard from them of her noble efforts to help her family."

This was a new view of the case to Joey, who decided to go and see his mother and sisters in the evening.

Just before Anthony passed out of the tea-room, after giving his flowers to Sarah, two stout countrywomen with children came in; people who had arrived by train, with the dust of travel in their throats, and to whom a cup of tea never came amiss at any time. Jenny made them comfortable in soft chairs, and gave them a pot and a pile of scones; then she came back to Sarah's table, and, kneeling down, encircled the lilies of the valley with her arms. She inhaled deep breaths of perfume, and gave them forth in long sighs, with her eyes shut. Sarah watched her.

"They are the very dearest flowers you can buy," she remarked. "And I know they are bought, because of the wires on the stalks."

Jenny opened her eyes and gloated on them. "You have seven, Sally," she said wistfully. "You might give me one."

"For the matter of that, they are more yours than mine," said Sarah. "But take all you like."

Jenny took one green stalk in her fingers, and, walking to the fireplace, over which their old family pier-glass, its gilt frame swathed in Liberty muslin, afforded customers the opportunity of seeing that their bonnets were on straight, pinned the fragrant morsel at her throat. The white bells lay under her chin, and she was looking down her nose and sniffing at them all day.

Anthony came for tea at five o'clock, and saw them there, and, one minute after, saw them not there. On that occasion he had no conversation with the wearer, but talked for twenty minutes with her sister, becoming very confidential. On the following day he came also, bringing violets and English primroses in a little basket from the Toorak garden; having given Maude to understand that they were for the adornment of his own rooms. On the day after that he came again; and Mrs. Oxenham, whom he had imagined to be paying calls with her stepmother, came at the same hour and caught him. He was comfortably taking his tea at Sarah's table, when he was suddenly made to feel like a little schoolboy playing the truant.

Mary beckoned him to her, and took him to task forthwith.

"My dear boy, what are you doing here?"

"Having tea and scones. It's what everybody does who comes here."

"But you have not brought any one?"

"No; I had a fancy for a solitary cup."

"Oh, solitary! You think I didn't see you, lolling with your arms on that girl's table and talking to her—looking as if you had been sitting there for hours."

"I really hadn't been sitting there for hours; I have not been in the room five minutes."

"In that case, you are evidently very much at home here. Now, Tony dear, it *doesn't do*, you know."

"What doesn't do? What iniquity am I accused of? Maude brings me here, and gives me the taste for tea; and I find the Liddons keeping the place, and take that interest in the fact which we all do, and are in duty bound to do; and I talk a little to that poor crippled child—I can't talk to the other one, because she's always too busy; and here you look at me as if I were a shameless profligate—"

"Hush—sh! don't talk so loud. Some tea, dear, please,"—to Jenny, who approached to serve her

patroness. "There's no real harm in your coming here by yourself, of course—you don't suppose I am not quite aware of that; but it's the look of the thing, Tony. A man alone does *not* look well in a place like this."

"I don't think I ever thought of how I looked."

"You know what I mean. *We* come here, father and Maude and I, to help the place, and because we *do* want tea, Maude and I, at any rate——"

"So do I. I want tea occasionally, as well as other mortals sweltering in the city dust; and I'm sure I want to help the place."

"Don't be provoking, Tony. You never want tea—it's nonsense. When you are thirsty you want whisky and soda. And as for helping the place, you do exactly the other thing—and you must know it."

"What is the other thing?"

He lowered his voice, and Mrs. Oxenham did not answer him for some minutes, Jenny being present, looking rather unusually dignified, arranging the tray on the table. A faint perfume of violets exhaled from that small person as she passed him, whereby he knew that she had his flowers about her somewhere—in her breast, he fancied. He rose and stood, as he always did, when she was moving about him.

"The other thing," continued Mary, when he again took his seat, "is that you expose that poor girl to injurious suspicions."

"Good Heavens!" he ejaculated.

"It is of her that I think, and of whom you ought to think—not of your own idle man-about-town whims. You see she is a lady, Tony, not the sort of person one usually finds in these places—really a lady, I mean."

"Certainly. And I never thought of her as anything else, I assure you."

"She is quite helpless, poor child. She can't prevent men from coming in by themselves and loafing here, if they choose to do it. I don't think she ever sufficiently considered what she might be exposing herself to in that way, when she entered upon this business; but I know she intended the place to be a ladies' place."

Mrs. Oxenham sipped her tea with a vexed air, while Tony looked at her gravely, drawing his moustache between his lips, and meditatively biting it.

"You see, Tony, a number of people come here who know you, at any rate by sight—I can count at least half a dozen at this moment—and what do you suppose they say when they see you as I saw you just now?"

"I don't think I care much what they say."

"No; it doesn't affect *you*. It never does affect a man; but it affects my little Jenny, whom I have been so anxious to protect from anything of the sort. In the absence of all other reasonable attractions—to a man like you—they will say that you come here to amuse yourself with her."

"Anybody must see that it is impossible for a fellow to say a word to her. No will-o'-the-wisp could be more difficult to catch hold of."

"There are plenty of slack times—there are opportunities enough, of course, if one chooses to make them. Nobody will be so silly as not to know that. And it's not fair to her, Tony dear. *You* would not be blamed—oh, not in the least, of course; but she would be held cheap, on your account. They would forget that she was a lady—a great number don't remember it, don't know it, as it is; and the tea-room might lose some of its repute as a select little place. If she could help herself—if she could choose whether you are to be let in or not—it would be different. Don't you see?"

"I see," said Tony thoughtfully.

He sat back in his chair, absently gnawing his moustache, while Mrs. Oxenham, satisfied that she had explained herself and was understood, concluded her repast; and he even allowed her to go to Sarah's desk to pay for it. Then, at a signal from her, he perfunctorily escorted her downstairs, put her in the carriage, and saw her smilingly depart to pick up their stepmother, who was paying a visit to Mrs. Earl.

Walking meditatively into Elizabeth Street by himself, it suddenly occurred to him that he had not paid for his own tea and scone, in the peaceful enjoyment of which he had been so rudely interrupted. He hurried back to Sarah, with his sixpence in his hand, and apologies for his absent-mindedness.

Something in the intelligent face, as she looked keenly at him, prompted him to say—what he had not dreamed of saying—"My sister has been scolding me. She says I am not to come here any more, because Miss Liddon does not want men—men on their own account, I mean."

"I don't think she does—as a rule," said Sarah.

"I am sorry."

"Yes, so am I."

"I—I wonder whether I might call on you some day—where you live?"

"Unfortunately, we don't live anywhere—except here—we only sleep."

"Not on Sundays?"

"We have not made ourselves comfortable, even for Sundays, yet. She was so afraid of incurring expense till she saw how the business was going to answer. Now she is talking of a proper sitting-room, but of course it will take a little time. We used up our furniture for this." Sarah looked at him again, and, after an inward struggle, added in a lower tone, "We spend nearly all our fine evenings on the St. Kilda pier. Being kept in all day, we want air when we can get it, and sea air, if possible. She loves the sea, and it is easy to get down there when the tea-room is shut. Mrs. Oxenham recommended it."

He held out his hand—though the room was full, and three women who wanted his attentions for themselves were watching him—and his eyes said "Thank you" as plainly as eyes could speak. Carefully looking away from the spot where Jenny was busy, but hungrily observing him, and from the faces of his lady acquaintances, he plunged down the stairs, and swung away to his club, with a light step.

At the top of Collins Street he encountered the carriage, with Maude and Mary in it, and they stopped to speak to him.

"Come home to dinner with us, Tony," his stepmother entreated, with all her smiles and wiles.

"Can't," he briefly answered her.

"Oh, why not? We are just going out."

"Another engagement, unfortunately."

"What engagement? There's nothing on to-night, I'm sure."

He didn't know what to say, so he nodded in the direction of the club. For all the engagement he had was to go and walk up and down the St. Kilda pier.

CHAPTER IX

THE POTENTIAL HUSBAND

Sarah found herself obliged to go home when the tea-room closed. It was absolutely necessary, she said, to wash her hair. She would not be longer than she could help, and if Jenny liked to go to the pier by herself—for *she* should not lose the refreshment of the sea air, so fagged as she looked—her mother and sister could join her there when the hair was dried sufficiently.

Jenny did not feel called upon to forego the recreation of which she was so much in need, and had long been accustomed to go about at all hours by herself, safe and fearless, though Sarah was not allowed to do so. So the proposition was agreed to; in fact, it was jumped at.

"And if you find it late before you are ready, dears," said Jenny, fixing her hat by the tea-room pier-glass, "don't mind about fetching me. I can bring myself back quite well. It isn't worth while to waste a shilling on mere going and coming."

"All right," said Sarah; and mentally added, "I ought to be ashamed of myself, I know—but I don't care!"

She set out briskly to walk home with her mother, glad of the exercise after sitting for so many hours; and her sister spent an extra penny to ride from Spencer Street to the bridge because of her over-tired legs. It was their habit to take the tram to St. Kilda in preference to the train, in order to be freely blown by such air as there was on the journey to and fro; and she seated herself on the fore end of the dummy on this occasion, quite unaware of the fact that a man in the following vehicle was in chase of her. She anticipated a long evening of lonely meditation, which was the thing above all others that she desired just now—two whole hours in which she might hug the image of Mr. Anthony Churchill in peace.

That gentleman in his proper person watched her flitting down the seaward road. He had not seen her in her hat before, and daylight was failing fast, but he knew the shape and style of the airy little figure a long way off. He suspected Sarah of having contrived that it should be alone to-night; but he knew that Jenny was guiltless of any knowledge that lovers were around. Was he her lover? He put the question to himself, but shirked answering it. He would see what he was a couple of hours hence. One thing he was quite clear about, however, and that was that her defencelessness was to be respected.

Unconscious of his neighbourhood, she made her way to the pier, which was almost deserted,

and seated herself on the furthest bench. There she composed herself in a little cloak that she had brought with her, and began to stare into the grey haze of sky and sea, starred with the riding lights of the ships at Williamstown, never once turning her head to look behind her. Anthony sat down at the inner angle of the pier, stealthily lit a pipe, crossed his legs, laid his right arm on the rail, and watched her.

"After all," he thought, "her father was an Eton boy; he really was—I have proved it—and he had a marquis to fag for him. His people were gentlefolks; so was he; showed it in every word he spoke, poor old boy. Maude, now—her grandfather was a bullock-driver, and couldn't write his name; and her father's a vulgar brute, in spite of his knighthood and his money-bags. And Oxenham is a Manchester cotton fellow—got the crest for his carriage and tablespoons out of a book. I don't see why they should want to make a row. Trade is trade, and we are all tarred with that brush. Goodness knows it would be a better world than it is if we all conducted business as she does—were as scrupulous and high-minded in our dealings with money. We are in no position to look down upon her on that ground. As for money, there's plenty; I don't want any more."

He puffed at his pipe, and the little figure grew dimmer and dimmer; but he could see that she had not stirred.

"Little mite of a thing! No bigger than a child she looks, sitting there—like a baby to nurse upon one's knee. In the firelight ... in the dusk before the lamps are lit ... gathered up in her husband's arms, with that little head tucked under his ear—"

He tapped his pipe on the pier-rail, rose, and walked up and down.

"Why not?" he asked himself plainly. "Could I regret it, when she is so evidently the woman to *last*? Beauty is but skin deep, as the copy-books so justly remark, but her beauty is not that sort; she's sound all through—a woman who won't be beholden to anybody for a penny—who makes her own frocks—takes care of them all like a father—stands against the whole world, with her back to the wall—"

Such were his musings. And, my dear girls—to whom this modest tale is more particularly addressed—I am credibly informed that quite a large number of men are inclined to matrimony or otherwise by considerations of the same kind. *You* don't think so, when you are at play together in the ball-room and on the tennis-ground, and you fancy it is your "day out," so to speak; but they tell me in confidence that it is the fact. They adore your pretty face and your pretty frocks; they are immensely exhilarated by your sprightly banter and sentimental overtures; they absolutely revel in the pastime of making love, and will go miles and miles for the chance of it; but when it comes to thinking of a home and family, the vital circumstances of life for its entire remaining term, why, they really are not the heedless idiots that they appear—at any rate, not all of them.

I was talking the other day to a much greater "swell" than Anthony Churchill ever was—a handsome and charming bachelor of high rank in the Royal Navy, about whom the young ladies buzzed like summer flies round a pot of treacle—and he was very serious upon the subject, and desperately melancholy. He was turning forty, and wearying for a haven of peace. There must have been any number of girls simply dying to help him to it, and yet he considered his prospects hopeless. "I see nothing for it," he said, "but to marry a good, honest cook, or spend a comfortless old age in solitude,"—not meaning by this that his dinner was of paramount importance to him, for his tastes were simple, but that he despaired of finding a lady whom the home of his dreams—and of his means—would hold. His dreams, he seemed to think, were out of date. In fact, he shared the views of the man in *Punch*, who was prevented from getting married by his love of a domestic life. And many others share those views. And thus the army of old maids waxes ever bigger and bigger—and they wonder why.

Not, of course, that I wish to disparage the old maid, especially if she can't help it; and far be it from me to teach the pernicious doctrine that a girl's business in life is to spread lures for a husband. I only say that an unmarried woman is not a woman, but merely a more or less old child; that marriage should come at the proper time, like birth and death; and that if it doesn't—if it falls out of fashion, as everybody can see that it is doing, in spite of nature and the parties concerned—then something must be very rotten somewhere. We will leave it at that.

Anthony Churchill had had a hundred butterfly sweethearts, and been a few times in love. Earlier in life he might have bartered his future income for an inadequate sum down, had not happy accident intervened. Now he was experienced enough to know the risks he ran, old enough to understand what was for a man's good and comfort in his ripe years—that is, partly. No man can be quite wise enough until too late for wisdom to avail him anything. It must be a terrible thing to have the right of practically unrestricted choice in selecting a mate that you may never exchange or get rid of! To find, perchance, that you have blundered in the most awful possible manner, entirely of your own free will!

Though, as to that, free will is an empty term. We are purblind puppets all. To see through a glass darkly is the most that we can do. There was a long and slender shadow on the sea—a mail boat coming in, bringing travellers home—and as our hero watched it, standing with his back to the unconscious heroine, he thought how he had been as one of them but a few days ago.

"And little thinking that I was coming back to do a thing like this!"

He walked up and down once more, feeling all the weight of destiny upon him. And Jenny sat and

thought of him, and thought that never, never would he give a thought to her!

"What *would* they say," he asked himself, "if I really were to do it? I—I! And she the daughter of one of my clerks, and a restaurant-keeper!" He put the question from the Toorak point of view, and at the first blush was appalled by it.

Then he sat down again, and looked at the shadow of her hat against the sky.

"What do I care? They will see what she is—little creature, with that deer-like head!" He went off into dreams. "She shall not make her own frocks again, sweet as she looks in them—her children's pinafores, if she likes—monograms for my handkerchiefs—pretty things for her house. What a house she'll have!—all in order from top to bottom, and she looking after everything, as the old-fashioned wives used to do. I think I see her cooking, in a white apron, with her sleeves turned up. When the cooks are a nuisance, like Maude's, that's what she'll do—turn to and cook her husband's dinner herself. Catch Maude cooking a dinner for anybody! By Jove, I shouldn't like to be the one to eat it." The pipe had been set a-going unconsciously, and he puffed in happy mood. "A real home to come back to of a night, when a fellow's tired—when a fellow grows old.... Sitting down with him after dinner, with her sewing in her hands—not wanting to be at a theatre or a dance every night of her life—not bringing up her daughters to want it. How quickly she sews! I watched her at it—able to do anything with those little hands, no bigger than a child's. But she's no child—not she; no doll, for an hour's amusement, like those others. A woman—a real woman, understanding life—a mind-companion, that one can tell things to; knows what love is too, if I'm not mistaken—or will do, when I teach her. Oh, to teach it to a woman with a face like that—with living eyes like those!"

He was at the end of the main pier, looking over the bulwark at the narrow shadow on the sea. It was nearly abreast of St. Kilda now, gliding ghostly, so dim that he only knew where it was by seeing where it was not. Standing sideways to Jenny's bench, he saw her get up, and saw the living eyes shine in the light of the green lamp.

He stepped towards her in a casual way.

CHAPTER X

AS THE WIND BLOWS

"Is that you, Miss Liddon? Getting a breath of sea air? That's right. Where are Mrs. Liddon and Miss Sarah?"

"Good evening, Mr. Churchill. Yes—a whiff; it is so pleasant when the sun is gone. My mother and sister were not able to come to-night, I—I am just going back to them."

"That you are not," said Mr. Churchill mentally; "not if I know it. But I must be careful what I'm about. She's shaking like a leaf—I can hear it in her voice. I mustn't be brutal and frighten her. Little lady that she is! She mustn't get the idea that I'm a Don Juan on the loose." He half turned as he dropped her hand, and said quietly, "I've been watching the mail boat. She's late. Do you see her over there?"

"Where?" asked Jenny; not that she wanted to see it, but that she didn't know what else to say at this upsetting moment.

"Just over there. But it's almost too dark to distinguish her. How glad they'll all be to get home in time for supper and a shore bed! Have you ever had a voyage?"

"Never."

"Then you don't know what a tedious thing it is."

"I only wish I did know," responded Jenny, who had gathered herself together. "I don't fancy I should suffer from tedium, somehow."

"Why? Do you want so much to travel? But of course you do, if you have never done it."

"Above all things," she said earnestly. "It is the dream of our life—my sister and I."

"You are happy in having it to come—in not being satiated, as I am. *My* dream just now is to settle down in a peaceful home, and never stir away from it any more."

The green light was on her face, and he saw her smile, as if no longer afraid of him.

"You can have whatever you dream," she said. "We shall probably never realise ours. Still, we can dream on. That costs nothing."

"Oh, you will realise it—never fear." He abandoned his peaceful home upon the spot, and determined to take her travelling directly they were married. And there was no prospect of tedium in that plan either, for his experience, full as it was, had never included the charm of such a companion, the delight of educating and enriching the mind of an intelligent woman who was also his own wife.

"Meanwhile," said Jenny, "we get books from the library, and read about the places that we want to see, and the routes to them. We know the Orient Line guide by heart. We hunt for pictures, and photographs, and illustrated books. There are some nooks and corners of Europe we know so well that we shall never want a guide when we get there—if we ever do get there."

"You'll get there," said Anthony confidently; "don't doubt it."

It never occurred to him that she might decline to be personally conducted by him, but that was natural in a man of whom women had always made so much. He added, struck by a bright thought, "If you are fond of looking at pictures of places, I will send you a portfolio of photos that I have—mementoes of my many wanderings—if I may. They would amuse Miss Sarah. I should like to give her some amusement, if I could, poor little girl." But he never thought of Sarah in his plan for becoming the showman of the world, except that she must be disposed of somehow—she and her mother and that young ass in the office—so that Jenny might be free, and at the same time easy in her mind about them.

Jenny received the offer of the photos in silence; then said, "Thank you" with a perplexed expression, indicating that a "but" was on its way. He hastened to intercept it.

"There's the steamer—do you see? Patience rewarded. They have a Lord on board and a returning Chief Justice, and the loyal citizens down to meet them have had no dinner. They've been waiting on the pier at Williamstown for hours. Come and sit down, won't you? I'm sure your little feet must be tired."

He used the adjective inadvertently, and Jenny shied at it for a moment, like a dazzled horse. But she had not the strength to resist her intense desire to be with him a little longer, especially with that word, that tone of voice, compelling her.

"I must be going home," she murmured, but was drawn as by a magnet after him when he turned to the bench on which she had before been sitting.

"It can't be more than eight o'clock, and now's the time you ought to be out, when it's cool and fresh," said he. "Don't you find the heat of that room very trying since the warm weather came?"

They talked about the tea-room in an ordinary way. Then they drifted into confidences about each other's private lives and interests; and from that they went on to discuss their respective views as to books, creeds, and the serious matters of life; and all the time Anthony Churchill kept a tight hand upon himself, that he might not frighten her. It had to be a very strenuous hand indeed, for it was a sentimental night, with the sea and the stars and the soft wind, and she had never looked so sweet as now, away from all the associations of the tea-room, which he had grown to hate, sitting pensively at rest, with her little hands in her lap. More than that, he had never known how well she was educated, how much thinking she had done, how intellectually interesting she was, until he had had this talk with her.

At last, in an unguarded moment, he said more than he had meant to say. Laying his hat beside him, that he might feel the cool fan of the wind over his slightly fevered brain, he drew a long breath, and exclaimed in a burst, "Well, you have given me a happy hour! I wonder when you'll give me another like it?"

Immediately she began to recollect how late it was, and to be in a flurry to get home to her mother. All at once the suspicion that he might be divining her feeling for him, and that she might be running wicked risks, assailed her. She rose from her seat without speaking.

"Not yet!" he pleaded impulsively, as she looked for him to rise too; "not yet! Five minutes more!" And he took her hand, which hung near him, and tried to draw her back to his side, looking up at her in all the beauty of his broad brows, and his bold nose, and his commanding manliness, with eyes that burned through hers to her shaking heart. This was love-making, she knew, though not a word of love was spoken, and, under all the circumstances surrounding him and her in their social life, it terrified her.

"I have stayed too long already," she said. "I ought not to have been here alone—so late."

The tremble in her voice, as well as the implication of her words, shocked him, and he pulled himself up sharply, regretting his indiscretions as much as she did hers.

"Oh, it's not late. But I'm imposing on good nature, trying to keep you merely to talk to me. Fact is, I seldom come across people that I care to talk to." He held his watch open under a lamp. "Later than I thought, though—late for you to be about alone, as you say, Miss Liddon. You don't mind my seeing you home, do you?"

She thanked him, and they walked to the tram together, without saying anything except that they thought rain was at hand; and the tram set her down almost at the door of her lodgings, where Mrs. Liddon and Sarah awaited her on the doorstep—Sarah in an ecstasy of secret joy at the apparent success of her manœuvres.

Jenny never went alone to the pier after that night, and her admirer sought for another happy hour in vain. On the two occasions that he went to St. Kilda in the hope of a meeting, she had her family with her, and not all Sarah's artifices could disintegrate the party. Jenny loved him more distractedly than ever, but, having no assurance that he loved her in the right way, or loved her at all, she knew what her duty was. And she had the resolution to act accordingly, though it was a

hard task. He had scruples about going to the tea-room by himself, after what Mary had said to him; and he found it no fun to go with her, or other ladies. Then the rush of the races set in. Mr. Oxenham and other guests arrived from the country; horses had to be inspected; betting business became brisk and absorbing; lunches, garden parties, dinners, balls, crowded upon one another in a way to carry a society man and bachelor off his feet. In short, for a few weeks Mr. Anthony Churchill almost forgot the tea-room. Almost—not quite. The portfolio of photographs arrived by the carrier (and the formal note of thanks for it was preserved, and is extant to this day); flowers for Sarah came from Paton's, at short intervals, with all the air of having been specially selected; Joey swaggered into the new sitting-room with news of his rise to £200 a year, imagining it to be the reward of transcendent merit. But poor little Jenny, harried with great crushes of tea-drinkers, worn with fatigue and heat and bad air and a restless mind, ready to go into hysterics at a touch, but for the fact that there was no time for such frivolities, sighed for the refreshment of her beloved's voice and face in vain. Day after day, week after week, she watched for his return, and he came not. She concluded that her effort to do her duty had been successful, and—though she would have done the same again, if necessary—she was heart-broken at the thought.

To tell the honest truth, as a faithful chronicler should do, our hero very nearly *did* abandon her at this juncture. When love, even the very best of love, is in its early stages, it is easily nipped by little accidents, like other young things. It wants time to toughen the tender sprout, and develop its growth and strength until it can defy vicissitudes; nothing but time will do it, let poets and novelists say what they like to the contrary. And so Anthony, not having been in love with Jenny Liddon for more than a few days (and having been many times in love), was seduced by the charms of the stable and the betting-ring and the good company in which he found himself, when deprived by circumstances of the higher pleasure of her society. More than that, her image was temporarily superseded by that of a beautiful and brilliant London woman who was on a visit to Government House, and whom in this time of festivity he was constantly meeting. She was a lady of title and high connections, and she singled him out for special favour because he was big and handsome, travel-polished and proper-mannered, and altogether good style as an attendant cavalier. His family (barring his stepmother), proudly aware of the mutual attraction, and pleased to hear it joked of and commented on amongst their friends, formed the confident expectation that a marriage would result, whereby their Tony would have a wife and a position of a dignity commensurate with his own surpassing worth.

CHAPTER XI

NATURE SPEAKS

At the end of the gay season, when races were over, and multitudinous parties had become a weariness to the flesh, a few people of the highest fashion went on a yachting cruise, to recruit their strength after all they had gone through. Of these Tony was one, and Lady Louisa, whom he was expected to bring back as his affianced bride (she was a widow of thirty-five), was another; and Maude Churchill (without her husband, and bent on circumventing Lady Louisa) was a third. They were got up elaborately in blue serge and white flannel and gold buttons, and the smartest of straw hats and knotted neckties, and they set off on a hot morning of late November, when the breeze was fair.

Mary Oxenham saw them start. She had refused to accompany them, partly because she felt she was too quiet for such a party, and partly because she wanted to return to her own household and children, whom she seldom left for so long. As she bade the voyagers good-bye she said to her brother, "What are you going to do at Christmas, Tony?"

"Stay with us—in his own father's house—of course," Mrs. Churchill interposed promptly. "You can come down, Mary."

"I can't, Maude; I must be at home, as well as you. You won't come to me for Christmas, Tony?"

"I don't think so, Polly—many thanks," he answered. "I expect my father will want me here." The fact was, he had too many interests in Melbourne to wish to leave at present.

"Well, come when you can, dear old fellow. I want to have you all to myself, if it's only for a few days."

"I will, Polly, I will. Good-bye, and take care of yourself. Are you really going away before we come back?"

"At the end of the week, Tony. I have been away too long—all your fault, bad boy. Well, good-bye again. *Bon voyage*, everybody!"

The town clock was striking the quarter before noon when she re-entered her carriage at Spencer Street, and it occurred to her to drive to the tea-room, to see how Jenny was getting on. Like Tony, she had been forgetting and deserting her *protégée* during the bustle of the last few weeks, and felt a twinge of self-reproach in consequence.

Entering the room, which fortunately chanced to have no customer at the moment, she was surprised to see Jenny sitting, or rather lying, in one of the low chairs, with her head laid back

and her eyes closed, her chest slowly rising and falling in heavy, dumb sobs—evident symptoms of some sort of hysterical collapse. Sarah and her mother were hanging over her in great alarm and distress, as at a spectacle they were wholly unused to, Mrs. Liddon persuading her to drink some brandy and water which the landlady had hastily produced.

"Oh, what is the matter?" cried Mrs. Oxenham, hurrying forward. "What ails Jenny? Oh, poor child, how ill she looks!"

"She's just worn out," said Mrs. Liddon. "I've seen it coming on for weeks, and nothing that I could say would make her take care of herself. She *will* come here and work when she's not fit to stand. We wanted her to stay at home this morning, but no—she wouldn't listen to us."

Jenny struggled to sit up and shake herself together. "Oh, mother, don't scold me," she said. "It's just the heat, I think. It's nothing. I shall be right in a moment I—I—oh, I *am* a fool! Mrs. Oxenham, I am so sorry—so ashamed—"

Her mother held the glass between her chattering teeth, and she drank a little brandy and water, and choked, and burst out crying.

"Jenny," said Mrs. Oxenham, in a voice of authority, "you come away out of this immediately. I have the carriage here, and I will drive you home." In a flash she remembered that the mother and sister could not be spared from the tea-room, that the girl should not be left alone in lodgings, and that Maude and Tony were safely off to sea. "Home with me, I mean," she continued. "I will send you back to your mother to-night, when you are all right again. You can do quite well without her, can't you"—turning to Mrs. Liddon—"now that you have Mrs. Allonby's help?"

Mrs. Allonby, who was the basket-maker's wife, volubly assured Mrs. Oxenham that she could easily manage Miss Liddon's work now that the crush of race time was over, and if she couldn't, there was her niece to fall back upon. Mrs. Liddon and Sarah said the same as well as they could, but were almost speechless with gratitude. Sarah did not know that Mr. Anthony had sailed away, and she began to see visions and to dream dreams of the most beautiful description. She had a shrewd idea as to what Jenny's complaint arose from, though not a word had been breathed on the subject, and this seemed the very medicine for it. She ran to get her sister's hat and gloves, when they had composed her a little, and would not regard any protests whatever.

"It is the very, *very* thing to set her up," she cried, in exultation. "And, oh, it *is* good of you, Mrs. Oxenham!"

"Come, then," said that lady. "I will take care of her for the rest of the day, and you see if I don't send her back to you looking better than she does now. Quite a quiet day, Jenny dear; you need not look at your dress—it is quite nice. There's nobody in the house but my father and husband."

Before she had made up her mind whether to go or not, Jenny found herself dashing through the streets in Mrs. Churchill's landau, having been half-pushed, half-carried down the stairs and hoisted into it—she, who had been the controlling spirit hitherto. Joey, on the way to his dinner, saw her thus throned in state, and could scarcely believe his eyes. "There's my sister having a drive with the boss's daughter," he casually remarked to a couple of fellow-clerks, as if it were no new thing; but the spectacle deeply impressed him. That day he patronised the tea-room for the first time, to the delight of his adoring mother, and began to identify himself with his family.

Jenny recovered self-possession in the air. She was agitated by the new turn in her affairs—by the wonderful chance that had snatched her out of the turmoil of her petty cares into the serene atmosphere of the world of the well-to-do, who were untroubled by the necessity of earning their bread, into the enchanted sphere where her beloved's life revolved; but she no longer trembled and cried, like the weakly of her sex, because her nerves were too many for her. Nothing more discouraging than a discovery that the milk-jugs had not been washed by Mrs. Allonby's niece, whose duty it now was to prepare them overnight, had broken down the spirit that had withstood long wear and tear of strenuous battle like finely-tempered steel; and a like trifling encouragement was sufficient to lift it up again. The ease of the carriage was delicious; the relief of having nothing to do unspeakable; the sight of the beautiful gardens and stately rooms of the house that entertained her as a guest and equal, more refreshing than either. The day was such a holiday as the girl had never had before.

Mrs. Oxenham made her lie on a springy sofa for an hour, while they quietly talked together; then they had a *tête-à-tête* lunch—delicate food and choice wine that comforted soul and body more than Jenny knew; and again she was made to rest on downy pillows—to sleep, if she could—while Mary in an adjoining room played Mendelssohn's *Lieder*, one after another, with a touch like wind-borne feathers. By-and-by the girl was shown about the house, made acquainted with precious pictures and works of art brought together from all quarters of the world, such as she had never seen or dreamed of; and great photographs, scattered about in costly frames, were named to her as she moved in and out amongst them.

"This is my husband, whom you have not seen—but he will be here to dinner, and you needn't be at all afraid of him, for he is one of the gentlest and dearest of men," said Mrs. Oxenham, taking up a mass of *repoussé* silver that enshrined the image of a burly fellow with a plain but honest face. "And this is my young stepmother, whom I think you *have* seen; she is in the dress she wore when she was presented at Court. This is my brother—I have a little half-brother, the sweetest baby, that we will have down to amuse us presently, but this is my only *own* brother; him, I think,

you have also seen."

She passed on to others, and Jenny passed on with her; but presently, while Mrs. Oxenham was writing a note, the girl returned to the table on which stood the counterfeit presentment of her red-bearded hero, in peaked cap and Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers and hob-nailed boots—such a magnificent figure in that crowd of distinguished nobodies! Looking up when she had finished her note, Mrs. Oxenham saw her standing, rapt and motionless, with the heavy frame in her hands, and was struck by the expression of her face and attitude.

"Good heavens!" she mentally exclaimed. "I do hope and trust that boy has not been thoughtless!"

She remembered how she had found him in the tea-room, and his proneness to amatory dalliance of a fleeting kind, inevitable in the case of a man so handsome, and so much sought after by flirting women; and she had a moment of grave uneasiness. Then she reflected upon Jenny's soberness of nature and Tony's opportune departure with Lady Louisa, and was at ease again.

Tea was served at five, and the children came down to be played with. Then Mr. Churchill and Mr. Oxenham returned from their club to dinner, and the latter was introduced to Jenny, and both did their part to put her at ease and make her feel at home and happy. The old gentleman took her in to dinner on his arm, and was concerned that she did not eat as she should, and told her she wanted a change to the seaside, racking his brains to think how he could manage to cozen her into accepting some assistance that would make such a thing practicable. Soon after dinner was over the hansom Mrs. Oxenham had ordered was announced, and the good old fellow, bustling in from his wine, declared his intention of seeing Miss Liddon home in person. He blamed Mary for sending her away so soon, but Mary said it was better for her to go to bed early; and then Mr. Churchill said he hoped Miss Liddon would soon come again—forgetting that his daughter was on the point of leaving him, and that his young wife would be little likely to endorse such an invitation.

Jenny left in a glow of inward happiness, and of gratitude that she could not express, though she tried to do so. Mrs. Oxenham wrapped her in a Chuddah shawl, and kissed her on the doorstep.

"Good-night, dear child," she said, quite tenderly. "Go straight to bed and to sleep, and don't go to the tea-room to-morrow. I shall come and see you early."

Having watched her charge depart in her father's care, this kind woman returned to her husband, whom she found alone in the dining-room, smoking, and reading the evening paper, with his coffee beside him.

"Harry, dear," she said, "I want to ask you something."

"Ask away," he returned affably.

"Would you have any objection to my having that girl to stay with me for Christmas—that is, if she will come?"

He laid down his paper and thought about it. Though he was a Manchester cotton man, he was no snob, or he would not have been Mary Churchill's husband; but this was, as he would have termed it, a large order.

"Who else is coming?" he inquired.

"Nobody. That is, I have not asked anybody at present. I think I'd rather we were quietly by ourselves. She's a lady, Harry, you can see it for yourself. Her father was an Eton boy."

"Eh? You don't say so!" This was certainly a strong argument.

"And she is thoroughly out of health. I never saw a girl so altered—shattered with hard work, poor little soul. I believe if she doesn't get a long rest and a change that she will have a severe illness, and then what would become of her mother and sister, and the business she has managed so splendidly? Now that Cup time is over, it is possible for them to do without her for awhile, and country air and good feeding and a little looking after would set her up, I know. And I don't see how else she is to get it. I am sure the children would like to have her, Harry; and she is so modest and quiet that she would never be in the way."

"What about Tony?" asked Mr. Oxenham.

"He is not coming. I asked him, but he said he couldn't leave town. He is too much engaged with Lady Louisa, I suppose; and if she didn't keep him, Maude would. Oh, if there was the slightest chance of Tony being at Wandooyamba, of course I shouldn't ask Miss Liddon there."

"Well, my dear, I'm sure I don't care, one way or another. Do just what you think best."

"You are quite sure you don't mind, Harry?"

"Not in the least. What's good enough for you is good enough for me, and, personally, I think she's an awfully nice little thing."

"Then I shall go and settle it with her mother in the morning," said Mrs. Oxenham, "and we will take her back with us."

CHAPTER XII

TWO WISE MEN

It was not far from Christmas when Anthony returned from his cruise, which he did in a listless, yawning, world-weary frame of mind. He had not enjoyed himself as he had expected to do, and wished he had remained in Melbourne at work, and given his old father a holiday instead. Tasmania had looked beautiful, to be sure, but he had seen too many things that were more so, and seen them too recently, to be impressed by its hills and streams; while the sea had no charm after his recent voyage. He had wholly depended on his company for entertainment, and his company had disappointed him. Few, indeed, can stand the test of such conditions as those under which they were expected to shine, as under a microscope, with double lustre and meaning (he had not stood it himself); and it was not surprising that the brilliant Lady Louisa had failed to substantiate her pretensions to be a clever woman, or that Mrs. Churchill had contrived to make a most kindly-disposed stepson hate her. Not, of course, that it was necessary for Lady Louisa to show herself clever in order to captivate our hero, or any man; it was because her stupidity had led her to waste her blandishments on a brainless idiot of a whisky-drinking globe-trotter, whose name was his only title to be called a gentleman, that it had manifested itself so unmistakably to her superseded slave. When the bookless, newspaperless, trifling time was over, he stepped ashore with a sense of being released from an irksome bondage, and determined to keep clear of his late too close companions for many a long day. One only was excepted—an old chum and crony, who had accompanied him on the voyage from England, a Queensland squatter, who lived nine months of the year in Melbourne—Adam Danesbury by name. Mr. Danesbury had afforded much amusement on board the yacht by boasting modestly of his recent engagement to a girl at home; showing her likeness, worn in a locket on his watch-chain, to the ladies, and confiding to them his plan for returning to marry and fetch her out as soon as he had got his northern shearing over. The ladies thought it was so very funny of him; any other man, they said, would have kept such a thing as dark as possible, under the circumstances. But Anthony Churchill, who had always made a friend of Danesbury, had never liked him so well as he liked him now.

"Come up to my place and dine with me to-night," he said to him, as the party were dispersing in the yard of the railway station; "and let's have a quiet pipe and a little peace, after all this racket."

"All right," said Mr. Danesbury, "I'm on."

They spoke in low tones, like a couple of conspirators.

"Mr. Churchill! Mr. Churchill!" called Lady Louisa from a Government House carriage, to which a callow aide had escorted her. "What have I done that I should be neglected in this manner? Are you not even going to say good-bye to me?"

Anthony advanced with his man-of-the-world courtliness, and pressed her outstretched hand. "No," he said, "I never mean to say good-bye to you—until I am obliged."

"*Au revoir*, then," she laughed. "You will come and see me soon?"

He bowed as to a queen, while the young A.D.C., whose enchantress she was at the moment, notwithstanding the fact that she was almost old enough to be his mother, glared ferociously.

"These conceited colonials!" he muttered to himself; "these trading cads, putting on the airs of gentlemen! What presumption of the fellow to speak in that tone to HER!"

"Tony," cried Maude, from the midst of her bags and bundles, which her maid was counting into the hands of a cabman, "you will see me safe home, Tony?"

"Well, really, Maude, I don't see how you can help getting home safely, with your own husband to take care of you," Tony replied, a little irritably (his father, delighted to get his young wife back again, was calling her carriage up). "You don't want me now."

"Tony, you know I *always* want you. And you *might* come just for a cup of tea and to see the children. They'll be expecting you."

"I'll see them on Sunday. I must go home and get washed and decent."

"As if you couldn't get washed in our house, where you've got your own rooms, and dozens of suits of clothes lying in your drawers!"

"Oh, I know; but you must excuse me now, really. There'll be letters and all sorts of things at my chambers, waiting for me, and I telegraphed to Jarvis to have my dinner ready."

He detached himself from her clutches, and, when her carriage drove off, called up his hansom and flung himself into it with a sigh of relief. "Thank God, that's over!" he ejaculated, drawing his cigar-case from his pocket. "What fools women are! The more I see of them, the more sick of them I get."

It was great luxury to find himself in his own bachelor home, where the priceless Jarvis had everything in order and ready for him, and where he was his own man, as he could never be elsewhere. He had an iced drink, and read his letters, and glanced at half a dozen newspapers, lolling bare-armed upon a sofa, with a pipe in his mouth and slippers on his feet; and then he

had a bath and elaborately dressed himself, putting a silk coat over his diamond-studded shirt; and Jarvis set the dainty dinner-table, and Danesbury arrived.

"Come in, old fellow!" shouted the emancipated one, hearing his friend in the hall. "Now we'll enjoy ourselves! Take off that black coat—no ladies to consider now; we may as well be cool and comfortable when we do get the chance. Dinner ready, Jarvis? All's vanity and vexation of spirit, old man, except one's dinner. Thank God, we've still got that to fall back upon!"

"We've got something more than that to fall back upon, let us hope," said Mr. Danesbury, smiling. "At any rate, I have."

"Oh, *you!* You've got Miss Lennox to fall back on, of course. But we are not all so lucky."

"What's happened to you, that you should class yourself with the unlucky ones? But I know; Lady Louisa hasn't appreciated you. I can quite understand that you feel bad about it, being so little accustomed to such treatment."

"Hang Lady Louisa! A battered old campaigner, with no more heart or brains than a Dutch doll! I should be sorry to feel bad over a woman of that sort."

"What then?"

"Lord knows. A troubled conscience, perhaps, for having wasted so much valuable time. Dinner, as I said before, will restore me. Sit down."

They sat down, and did justice to Jarvis's preparations. Anthony's little dinners were famous amongst dining men, who knew better than to disturb enjoyment and digestion with too much conversation while they were in progress; but when this meal had reached the stage of coffee and cigarettes, the two friends fell into very confidential talk.

"What you want," said Adam Danesbury, "is to get married, Tony."

"Why," said the host, "you've been the loudest of us all in denouncing those bonds—till now. Because you've lost your tail, is that any reason why we should cut off ours?"

"That's all very well while we're young and foolish," said Mr. Danesbury sedately (he was a sedate person always, but "a devil of a fellow," all the same, at times). "And I denounce the thing still, when it's nothing but a buying and selling business, like what we so often see. But get a good girl, Tony—a girl like *my* girl—one who doesn't make a bargain of you, but loves the ground you walk on, though you may go barefoot—*then* it's all right. Think of our advanced age, if you please. Byron was in the sere and yellow leaf before he was as old as I am, and you are close up. Twenty years hence we shall be old fogies, and we shall have lost our appetite for cakes, if not for ale, and they will shunt us into corners; then we shall want our girls and boys to ruffle it in our place. If we don't look sharp, those girls and boys won't be there, Tony, and it will feel lonely—I know it will."

"These be the words of wisdom," said Tony reflectively. "I must confess I had forgotten about the girls and boys."

"Oh, but, apart from them, it's a mistake to put it off, after a certain time of life—that is, of course, if you can find the right sort of woman. For God's sake, don't go and throw yourself away on one of these society girls. What a fellow wants is a home, and they don't seem to know the meaning of the word."

"How would you describe the right sort of woman?" asked Anthony, pushing the wine towards his friend.

"I would say, a woman like Rose Lennox."

"Yes, of course—naturally. Only, unfortunately, I don't know Miss Lennox."

"I wish you did, Tony. If you had come down to my father's place, as I wanted you to, you would have met her. However, you will see her before long, I trust."

Anthony spread his arms over the table, and looked curiously at the man in whom Miss Lennox had wrought so great a change.

"Tell me about her, will you, old fellow?" he said. "Tell me, so that I may know what the right woman is like, when I do happen to see her."

Mr. Danesbury was nothing loth. He, too, spread his arms on the table, with an air of preparation, having placed his unconsumed cigarette in the ash-tray beside him.

"Well, in the first place, I must tell you she is poor," he began. "But she's none the worse for that."

"No, the better—the better!" cried Anthony, delighted. "I believe it's just money that spoils them all."

"Though she's poor, she's the most perfect lady that ever stepped."

The host nodded comprehendingly.

"Her father has the parish next to my father's; old Lennox got the living after I left home. It's

supposed to be worth two-fifty, but if he gets two it's as much as he does; and there are seven children. My Rose is the eldest—twenty-three next birthday."

"Yes?" Anthony had left off smoking, and was listening as men seldom listened to this love-sick swain.

"The way I knew her first—my sisters gave a garden party—you know those little clerical garden parties?—parsons and their wives and daughters from miles round, coming in their washed frocks and their little basket carriages; and two of the Lennox girls were there—nice, interesting little things, but not Rose. We had three tennis afternoons before I knew of her existence. I used to hear my sisters say, 'Why don't you make Rose come?' but never took any heed; until one day I had to drive some of them home, because a storm was coming, and they hadn't any carriage; and just as I got there the storm burst, and I went in to wait till it was over. And there I saw that girl—my Rose—sitting at a table, mending stockings, with half a dozen little brats saying their lessons to her. This was what she did every day—sewed, and kept house, and taught the children, while her sisters went out to play tennis. She said it was so good for them to have a little recreation—as if *she* wasn't to be thought of at all. That's the sort of woman she is."

Anthony stretched out his hand. "Show me that locket again, will you?"

Adam Danesbury detached watch and chain, and pushed them over the table. "It don't do her justice," he said tenderly. "She's got hair that you can see yourself in, and a complexion like milk; the colour comes and goes with every word you say to her, and her expression changes in the same way. Photography always fails with people of that sort. Still—there she is."

Photography had evidently not done justice to Miss Lennox. The ladies on the yacht had called her dowdy, and insignificant, and plain, wondering at Mr. Danesbury's taste; but, helped by that gentleman's description of her, Anthony made out a sweet and modest face, which held his gaze for several minutes. Her lover watched him eagerly—this accomplished connoisseur—and swelled with pride to see her so appreciated.

"Well?" he said challengingly.

"Well," said Anthony, as he snapped the locket, "she's a charming creature, and you are an enviable fellow."

"I am that," rejoined the lover, re-opening the case before hanging it to his button-hole. "And I shall be a great deal more enviable this time next year, please God."

CHAPTER XIII

TWO UNWISE WOMEN

This conversation haunted our young man all night, and drove him in the morning to the tea-room, in serious pursuit of the right kind of woman, if haply she might be found there. To his surprise and consternation the bird had flown.

"Not ill, I trust?" he said in alarm, at the end of five restless minutes, during which he had scarcely taken his eyes from the screen.

Sarah was arranging the flowers he had just brought her. She had patiently waited for this question. "No," she said, with a nonchalant air. "She *was* ill—very ill indeed—but she is all right now."

"Is she—she is not away?"

"Just now she is. She wanted a change so badly, poor dear."

"With friends?"

"Yes. They are most kind to her. It was just what she wanted, for she was quite worn out. The hard work at Cup time prostrated her."

"I'm awfully sorry to hear it. You are sure she is all right again?"

"Oh, quite. They weigh her every now and then, and she has gained half a stone."

"In this hot weather, too! Evidently it is doing her good. The sea, I suppose?"

"No. Mountains. At least I suppose they are mountains—I never was there myself."

"You must miss her very much?"

"Dreadfully. And I am afraid she worries about us. But the room goes on all right. Lucinda Allonby is a cat, but she is smart at waiting; and her aunt is a good soul. She is regularly in the partnership now."

"Yes. Did you say your sister had gone to Healesville?"

"No, I didn't."

She laughed mischievously, and Anthony laughed too, his bronzed cheek reddening.

"What then?" he pleaded. "Come, tell me, there's a good child."

"I should have thought you'd known," said Sarah, playing with his growing impatience.

"How was I to know anything, away on the sea?"

"I should have thought Mrs. Oxenham would have written to you."

"Of course she has written to me. I got two letters from her last night. But she has been out of town as long as I have."

"Not quite as long. She stayed a few days after you left, and then she went home; and she took Jenny with her."

"*What!*" Anthony almost bounded from his chair. "Took Jenny to Wandooyamba? As her guest?"

Sarah nodded carelessly. "Wasn't it good of her? She found Jenny looking very ill, and she said she must have a change and rest. And we hurried to get her clothes ready and fix up an evening dress for her, and off she went, and there she has been ever since."

"Ever since," groaned Anthony; "while I have been dawdling on that cursed yacht. If I'd only known——"

"I don't see," said Sarah demurely, "what it has to do with you."

She was a little sore about his long desertion, and wanted to know what it meant before she permitted herself to be confidential.

He plumped down on his seat in front of her. "It has everything to do with me," he said; "everything. Sarah—I am going to call you Sarah from this moment—shall I tell you something?"

She looked at him, holding her breath.

"You must keep it a secret for a little while, until I know whether she will have me. I am going to ask Jenny to be my wife."

He met her eyes boldly, for he had made up his mind; and she, seeing him serious and determined, clasped her hands in a speechless ecstasy of gratitude to Heaven for its goodness to her.

Then he went home and wrote a letter.

"DEAR POLLY,—

"Many thanks for yours, which I got both together last night. We only returned yesterday, or I would have written before. I am glad you found all well at home, and that the kiddies were pleased with their presents. Give them my love. Tell Harry I will see about the buggy and the stores at once; the latter shall go up by goods train to-morrow. I suppose he wants the waggonette big enough to hold you all—something like the old one, only lighter. It might have been rather serious, that smash. He's too risky with his half-broken cattle and his fancy driving, and that Emily always was a fiend incarnate. If she belonged to me I'd shoot her.

"I didn't have such a gaudy time as you seem to think. I'm sure I don't know what I went for, unless it was to get cool, which there was little chance of in a boat so crowded. Lord Nettlebury made a beast of himself as usual, regardless of the ladies, who pretended not to see it just because it was Nettlebury. I told Maude they disgraced themselves more than he did, by their indulgence of him; but women are all alike—or nearly all. It was sickening to see them fawning over the disgusting little brute, who ought to have been pitched overboard.

"Danesbury is the best of fellows—mad on his little English *fiancée*, and with no eyes for anybody else. They chaffed him unmercifully, but he liked it. She has wonderfully improved him. He says they are going to live in the country when she comes out, and he's looking for a place in this colony not too fatiguingly far from town. He's in the right there. Melbourne isn't wholesome. I'm sick of it myself—that is, I'm sick of streets, which are the same everywhere, and of sea, and of men and women who make a child's game of life. I want a sniff of the bush air before I settle down, and I think I'll run up to you to-morrow night, when I've seen about Harry's commissions. We have hardly had a good talk since I came back, and the kids will be forgetting me. Our stepmother has been rather getting on my nerves lately; it will be a relief to be out of her reach for a day or two. And my liver (perhaps that's why I've been so bored) wants horse exercise after so much loafing. Hal and I will have some rides together, tell him. I suppose the poor little beggars have done school, and are in the full swing of holidays by now. They won't object to a few more toys for Santa Claus's stocking, I daresay. I will bring you up some fish in ice, if I can get them fresh enough.

"Yours affectionately,

The writer of this letter posted it at the G.P.O. while spending his afternoon about town, buying buggies and Christmas presents for his sister's family, consequently it went up country by the five o'clock express, and Mrs. Oxenham received it before noon next day. No answer was expected or required, and therefore Tony was surprised and annoyed to get a telegram from her, just as he was thinking it time to change his clothes for his journey, to say,—

"Come to-morrow if equally convenient. Meet you night train."

"What the deuce—oh, here, Jarvis, hold on a bit. Confound the—what on earth does she mean? Can't have got that great house full of guests, so that there isn't a corner for me to sleep in—that would be too absurd. Going out, perhaps—but she wouldn't stop me for that. Can't be Jenny—she'd stop me altogether if she meant *that*. It's a dashed nuisance anyhow."

The packing was stayed, and he mooned away to the club, because he didn't know what else to do with himself. He was lost for want of occupation, and ridiculously angry at having to kick his heels for twenty-four hours for no earthly purpose that he could see. There was nothing to do or to interest one—there never is under these circumstances; his journey put back at the last moment, he was stranded until it could be put on again. So he drifted to the club.

There he found his father. It was the old gentleman's habit to play tennis after business, to keep his fat down—a habit formed long years before the lawn variety of the game had been invented; and Tony found him hard at it, and watched him listlessly.

As soon as Mr. Churchill was aware of his son's presence, he exclaimed: "Why, I thought you were off to Wandooyamba to-night!"

"Going to-morrow," returned Tony.

And when the game was over, the father said, "Come out and dine with us to-night, boy. You are deserting us altogether these days, and I've got a lot of business I want to talk over with you."

Tony recognised that it was his duty to accede, because he really had been neglecting his father (but that was Maude's fault); and he acceded accordingly, as cheerfully as he could. Jarvis having been informed by telephone, the two gentlemen took tram together, and were presently seen by Maude from her bedroom window sauntering up the garden, affectionately arm in arm. She dashed aside the gown that had been chosen for the evening, and called for Mrs. Earl's latest—a white brocade, full of gold threads, that was very splendid.

Anthony had leisurely dressed himself in the clothes he kept at Toorak for these chance occasions, and was pulling his coat lappets straight over his big chest when he heard her knock on his door.

"That you, mother?" he called. "How are you?"

"Oh, Tony! Are you ready, Tony?" she called back.

"Yes—no, not quite, I sha'n't be long."

"Do—do make haste and come downstairs. I've something I want to say to you—very particularly—before the others come down."

"All right. I won't be a minute."

He thought he would dawdle on until he heard the "others"—*i.e.*, his father—on the stairs; then he thought he might as well hear what the wonderful secret was. It was never safe to put her off. She was liable to burst at wrong times if kept bottled up too long.

CHAPTER XIV

A WEAK FATHER

He found her pacing up and down the long drawing-room with excitement in her face, all the gold drops on the crape front of her dress swinging and twinkling, the stiff train scratching over the carpet. She almost rushed at him when he appeared.

"Tony," she said, laying her heavily diamonded hand upon his arm, "your father says you are going up to Wandooyamba."

He flushed a little, admitting that he was. "And what then?"

"Tony, you—~~are~~—~~not~~—~~to~~—~~go~~."

"Oh, indeed! And pray, madam, who are you, to give me orders—*me*, that was dux of my school when you were in your cradle?"

"I am your mother, sir. It is a mother's business to give orders, and a son's to obey them. And I

say you are not to go to Wandooyamba."

"If a mother is to issue commands of that sort, and in that tone of voice, the least she can do is to give her reasons for them."

"The reason is that Mary has company up there—people—a *person*—a person that I don't choose you to associate with."

"And who may that person be? A he or a she?"

"You know quite well, so don't pretend you don't."

"I know nothing," said Tony mendaciously, "and am most anxious for information. I cannot imagine Mary associating with anybody who isn't fit to associate with me. But perhaps it is I who am not fit? Who's the almighty swell that I'm not good enough for?"

"No swell at all—quite the contrary. It's that tea-room girl—oh, Tony, I believe you knew all the time, only you like to put that mask on, because you know how I hate to see you look at me like a wooden image! It's that Liddon girl, that she made such an absurd fuss about. She wasn't well, and Mary took her to Wandooyamba to recruit, and she's there now."

"I don't see what that has to do with me," said he in a stately way; and he tried to move away from her.

Maude clutched him with both hands round his arm, and moved with him. "If it doesn't matter now, it will matter when you get under the same roof with her. Oh!"—looking up at him—"you *did* know she was there, and you *are* going after her! You used to sneak to the tea-room on the sly—heaps of people have told me—and now you are going to Wandooyamba just on purpose to make love to her—I can see it in your face, though you have your mask on! Oh! Tony dear, don't—*don't* be a naughty, bad boy—for my sake!"

"If I have ever been bad—bad to women," said Tony, removing his mask, "that time is over. Don't distress yourself. If I should by chance make love to Miss Liddon, it will be quite respectably, I assure you."

"But that would be *worse*!" shrieked Maude, coming to a standstill in the middle of the room, horrified. "Oh, Tony, what are you talking about—you, that have always been so fastidious! A tea-room girl! Oh, you are only trying to aggravate me! I didn't save you from Lady Louisa to have you throw yourself away on a tea-room girl!"

He almost shook her, he was so angry with her. "May I ask you to be so very good as to mind your own business, and allow me to manage mine?" he said, with a sort of cold fury in his voice and eyes. It was not the way a son should speak to his mother—indeed, it was quite brutal—but he could not restrain himself; and she, looking at him, guessed what the sudden rage portended.

"It *is* my business," she retorted, with equal passion. "It is my family's business—it is all our businesses—to see that we are not disgraced."

"Disgraced!" he drawled, with bitter amusement. "Good Lord!"

The white gauze over her bosom heaved like foam on a flowing tide, the gold drops studding it shook like harebells in a breeze.

"Tony," she burst out fiercely, "I shall tell your father of you."

She swept out of the room, and he heard her long tail scraping over the tiles of the hall, and rustling up the broad stairs.

"Little devil!" he muttered in his teeth; and then he laughed, and his eyes cleared, and he went out upon the colonnaded verandah and walked up and down, with his hands behind him, till the gong clanged for dinner.

Sedately he marched into the dining-room and stood by the table, he and the servants, all silent alike, waiting for host and hostess to come downstairs. Then in flounced Maude, in her glittering whiteness, with her head up, and a wicked flash of triumph in her eyes as she met the wooden stare of her stepson; and her husband followed at her heels, furtive, downcast, troubled—pretending for the present that all was well, and failing to convince even the footman that it was so. Tony was at once aware that Maude had "told his father of him," and all through dinner he was trying to forecast what the result would be. She sparkled balefully for a time, trying to tease him into disputatious talk; but his cold irresponsiveness cowed her into silence too, and the resource of wistful glances that hinted at remorse and tears. It was a dismal meal. When it was happily at an end, and she rose from her plate of strawberries, he marched to the door and held it open for her, standing stiffly, like a soldier sentinel. She looked at him appealingly, and whispered "Forgive me," as she swept slowly out; but he stared stonily over her head and took no notice.

Shutting the door sharply behind her, he returned to his seat at the table. The gliding servants vanished, and his father pushed the wine towards him. There was a long silence, which he would not break. The old man cleared his throat a few times, and smacked his lips over his old port. At last their eyes met, and the spell was lifted.

"What's this, my boy, about—about poor Liddon's daughter?"

Anthony laid a broad palm over his father's hand resting on the table. "Don't let us talk of it here, daddy," he said, with gruff gentleness. "Finish your wine comfortably. Then we'll go into the smoking-room, and I'll tell you all about it."

Mr. Churchill brisked up, tossed off his port, and was ready for the smoking-room at once. It was detached from the house, and its French doors opened upon a retired lawn, on which the moon shone between the shadows of shrubs and trees. They drew armchairs towards the threshold, and lit their pipes, but not the lamps, and talked and talked in the cooling twilight, as men who had confidence in one another.

At first the father would not hear of the projected match. He belonged to a vulgar little world that was eaten up with the love of money, and could not despise the conventions of his caste. He argued, gently but obstinately, that it would "never do, you know," for quite a long time, thinking of what Maude would say to him if he failed to be firm; but a mention of Maude's homely predecessor, and the days when there was no high fashion in the family, touched his susceptible heart. Tony drew comparisons between his dead mother, his stepmother and his proposed wife, and morals therefrom.

"Well, well," the old gentleman admitted, "there's something in that."

"Where would you have been without *her*, all that time when you were poor and struggling?"

"True. But you are not poor and struggling."

"I may be. No one can tell. Any sort of misfortune may come to a man. And in the day of adversity—well, you can see what she would be."

"Oh, she's a good girl—I never denied it—as good as they make 'em."

"Suppose I should fall ill? Maude's sister was at a ball the night before her husband died."

"She didn't know he was so bad, of course."

"She would have guessed if she'd been a woman of the right sort. Jenny won't go to balls when I am ill in bed, if it's only a cold or a headache."

"No doubt that's the sort to stick to you and comfort you." The old father sighed as he reflected on his increasing gout. "And I daresay—after all—in the long run perhaps—"

"Exactly. I am firmly convinced of it. She will last it out. And meanwhile, think of the cosy home I'll have! Oh, I may have been a careless, fast fellow, but I've had my ideas of what I would like to be, and like my home to be. And then there's the children—if anybody has got the makings of a good mother in her, she has. Don't you see it yourself?"

"Certainly. A good daughter always makes a good mother."

"If you'd seen her with Maude's brats—washing the milk and butter stains from their hands and mouths! And they took to her on the spot, as if they'd known her for years. It is a sure sign."

"Oh, it is—it is! Your mother had that way. Poor old girl! Many's the time I've seen her at the wash-tub, and ironing my shirts, and cooking my dinner, and you children hanging round her all the while. But it's odd to see a swell fellow like you caring for that sort of thing. You've been brought up so differently."

"Perhaps it's my mother's nature cropping out in me. But, in fact, it's because I've seen too much, sir."

"Too much what?"

"Too much woman—of the sort that I know *don't* make good wives—at any rate, not good enough for me."

"Ah, you're wise! I daresay you do take after your mother; she was better than I am. You are wiser for yourself than I should have been for you."

"I don't know that it's wisdom, consciously. It's pure selfishness, as like as not. I know she'll be good to me, and take care of me, and stick to me through thick and thin."

"You must stick to her, too, Tony."

"No fear. A man couldn't play the beast, with a wife of that sort; at least, I hope not. I mean to be a pattern husband."

After the third pipe he rose up stealthily.

"I'll just go and change my clothes and get home to bed," he said. "Say good-night to Maude for me. I won't disturb her again."

"Good-night, my boy. And you may tell her I've given my consent, if you like. Only, mind you, we shall have to abolish the tea-room for the sake of the family."

"We'll hand it over to the basket-maker's wife, and that fellow in the office must make a home for his remaining relatives. Good-night, dad—good old dad!"

He stole up to his room and changed his clothes, stole down again and out into the moonlit

garden. As the road gate clicked behind him he saw the front-door open, and in the effulgent aperture a white figure that glittered vaguely. A wailing note came through the scented dusk.

"Tony!"

"Good-night," he called back, and turned to run towards an approaching tram. He made his voice as cheerful and kindly as he could, for he forgave her now; but he said to himself, "Oh, you little Jezebel!" and then, in a graver spirit, "Thank God, my Jenny is not one of that breed!"

He went home to bed and slept like a new-born baby. Next morning he went early to the tea-room to tell Sarah that his father had given his consent and good wishes, and to inquire if Jenny was still at Wandooyamba—because Mary's telegram had made him nervous. Sarah said her sister was with Mrs. Oxenham still, and not to return till after Christmas; and Sarah wept a little for pure happiness, and kissed her potential brother behind the screen. He would have spoken to Mrs. Liddon, as suitor to guardian, before going away; but she was busy with her scones, and the girl declared they would all be spoiled and the credit of the tea-room ruined if such a surprise were sprung upon her at such a time. So he left the matter in Sarah's hands, and went away and did some more shopping; bought a beautiful little ring with a pea-sized pearl in it, in addition to fish and lollies. No more telegrams arrived, and Jarvis took the portmanteau to the station, and stood the crush of ticket-getting, and put his master's coat and the evening papers into the best corner of the smoking carriage on the express; and at 4.55 the happy man was borne upon his way, feeling certain that he was to see the wife he had promised himself before he went to bed that night.

CHAPTER XV

A STRAW AGAINST THE TIDE

Jenny was having an idyllic time at Wandooyamba. Mrs. Oxenham was not the woman to do things by halves, and, having undertaken to restore the girl to health, she set about the task with her native wisdom and capability. New milk in the morning; broth at eleven o'clock; drives behind Harry's wild teams, which never made her afraid; rides on a quiet pony with him and little Hal; rambles in the wooded hills about the house—the lone bush that she loved, but had never had her fill of; these things, in conjunction with a kindness from all around her that never allowed her to feel like an outsider, promptly brought a glow to the magnolia-petal whiteness of the little face, and a clear light to the eyes that had been so dull and tired.

She was so perfectly well-mannered and well-bred, and she looked so pretty in her neat gowns—particularly when she wore the black silk that had been cut low and frilled with lace for the evening, showing her delicately-curved and fine-skinned throat—that neither host nor hostess felt any incongruity in her position as their social equal and the equal of their friends. If they remembered the tea-room, they remembered also the father who had been an Eton boy; but soon they forgot all about her antecedents and belongings, and esteemed her wholly on her own merits. They wished they could have kept her altogether, as housekeeper, or companion, or governess to the children (two sturdy boys, who loved her with all the sincerity of their discriminating little hearts), because she was so gentle, and so useful, and never in anybody's way.

She was never in anybody's way, and yet she was always at hand if there was anything to be done that nobody else was ready to do. Until she had left the house no one realised the amount of unostentatious service that she represented. She made toys for the boys; she made sailor suits for them (though nobody had wanted her to do that); she arranged the flowers; she sewed and cut the weekly papers; she marked handkerchiefs; she made the tea; she took the children for walks, and kept them good by telling stories to them—a great relief to the house when school-time was over and the governess had gone away.

"She's just my right hand," Mary said to her husband one day; "and I don't know what I shall do without her when the time comes to send her home. It's like having a younger sister to stay with one."

"It is," said Mr. Oxenham, who had just found his favourite driving gloves, of which several fingers and thumbs had opened, mended so neatly that they were as good as ever.

Nevertheless, neither of them had any idea of making an actual younger sister of Jenny Liddon, and when Tony's letter arrived there was consternation over its contents.

"Now, isn't that just *too* bad?" Mary cried, as she dashed it on the table, and stamped her foot with vexation (Jenny being in the school-room with the boys). "When I wanted him to come, he wouldn't; and now I don't want him he starts off, without giving me any warning, in this way! Oh, it really is too provoking of him! To-morrow—that's this very night, less than twelve hours from now—he will be here, Harry. And that girl in the house!"

"It's awkward," said Harry, picking up the letter and perusing it for himself. "A fetching little thing like her, and a handsome, fast fellow like him, both under the same roof——"

"Oh, it must not be," Mrs. Oxenham declared impetuously. "It must be prevented at all costs. I have a duty to Jenny as well as to my brother. I only hope and trust he doesn't *know* she is here—I asked them not to mention it, and you see he says nothing about her; but, whether or no, I am not going to let either of them make fools of themselves, if I can help it."

"You can't very well tell him not to come, my dear."

"I know I can't. Besides, that would only make him the more determined."

"Nor yet pack Miss Liddon home, after asking her to stay over Christmas—like a schoolgirl expelled for misconduct."

"I know that too. I must scheme and plot to deceive them, like the bad women in novels; only they do it to harm people, while I shall do it for their good. Go away, Harry, and let me think."

He went away, and was uncomfortable till lunch time, when she met him with a calm face and a telegram in her hand, which she asked him to despatch to the township for her.

"I have put him off till to-morrow," she said. "You can tell him the horses were lame, or something."

Mr. Oxenham, who had scores of buggy horses, all jumping out of their skins with the exhilaration of their spring coats and renewed constitutions, said she must think of something that Tony would be more likely to believe than *that*. And she said, "Oh, leave it to me!" And he replied that he would do so with the very greatest pleasure.

The luncheon bell rang, and Jenny came into the pleasant dining-room, with the children clinging to her. She put them in high chairs on either side of her place at the table, and tied on their bibs, and cut up their roast mutton and potato, like the little mother that her lover dreamed of.

"Why do you bother about those brats, Miss Liddon, while the nurse spends all her time flirting over the back fence?" their father said, in a gay but compunctious tone. And he helped her to mayonnaise, and to her special wine, and to cool soda-water, and to salt, and to anything he could lay his hands on; for he feared they were going to treat her badly, and he wanted to put in all the good treatment that he could beforehand.

His wife regarded the girl with infinite kindness, but no compunction whatever—for she was a woman, and not a man.

"Jenny, dear," she said, "do you think you would enjoy a little drive this afternoon? I don't think it is too hot."

"I should, greatly," Jenny replied, the ready glow in her face. "But I enjoy everything—whether out of doors or in—whatever you like best."

"Me, too," clamoured little Hal. "Let me go too, mother! Then I can tell Miss Liddon some more about Uncle Tony's ship that he's gone to Tasmania in."

With the explosion of this unexpected bomb the colour flew over Jenny's face, and, because she knew she was blushing, it deepened to the hue of a peony. Anthony had not been named in the family circle since her arrival, except to and by this terrible infant; even Sarah had been afraid to interfere with the march of events by any allusion to him in her letters. So that Jenny believed him to be still upon the sea, and that nobody knew how she thought about him.

Mrs. Oxenham flashed one lightning glance at her guest, and leisurely helped her little son to gravy. "It isn't Uncle Tony's ship, as it happens; it is Mr. Daunt's," she said. "And what do you know about ships, you monkey?"

She looked at her husband, and he knew she looked at him, though he was eating industriously, with his eyes upon his plate.

"I sha'n't be able to take you this afternoon, Mary," he mumbled, with his mouth full, visibly shrinking. "I shall be busy."

"We shall not want you, dear," she calmly answered him. "Dickson can drive us. I am going to the township to do a little shopping for Christmas. And, Jenny, we will call on your aunt at the bank; it will be a good opportunity."

Jenny's aunt, her mother's sister, chanced to live in the town which was the Oxenham's post-town and their railway terminus. Neither aunt, uncle, nor cousins had communicated with the Liddons since the tea-room was instituted, and had intended never again to do so; but when they discovered that the arch-offender against the pride of the Rogersons was a guest at Wandooyamba, the great house of the district, which had never conferred such a distinction upon them, their attitude towards this kinswoman changed completely. They rushed to call upon her, and to clasp her in their arms, and to beg that she would go and see them while she was so near. Their call had not yet been returned, and the invitation had been disregarded, because Mrs. Oxenham had looked a little coldly upon the connection, and Jenny had preferred her friend to her relations; but now Mary considered that the time had come to attend to them. "We will go and see your aunt and cousins," she said cheerfully. "They must wonder what has become of you."

And Jenny thought it was so good of her to trouble about people she didn't care for, for the sake

of a guest who was of no account, and thanked her gratefully.

They set out immediately after luncheon. They had six miles to go, mostly up-hill, and the light breeze was behind them, carrying the dust of hot December into their necks and ears. Mrs. Oxenham beguiled the way with prattle about Mr. Daunt's yachting party and the beautiful Lady Louisa who held her brother in bonds; and Jenny looked annoyingly pale and tired when they arrived.

"We will go to the bank first," said the elder lady, "in the hope that Mrs. Rogerson will give us a good cup of tea."

And the coachman was ordered thither.

The maid who answered his ring at the private door announced that Mrs. Rogerson was in, and ushered the visitors upstairs into a stifling drawing-room—only used for the reception of callers and an occasional evening party. Here they sat for full ten minutes, fanning themselves with their handkerchiefs, and looking round upon the art muslin draperies, and be-ribboned tambourines, and Liberty-silk-swathed plates and photographs, waiting for their hostess to appear. Mrs. Oxenham made no remarks upon what she saw, nor upon the rustlings and whisperings that she heard, because these people were Jenny's relatives; and Jenny took no notice of anything.

Her aunt came in, damp and flushed with heat and haste and the weight of a silk dress covered with beads. She was a great contrast to Mrs. Liddon, as she was well aware; much more stylish in every way—much more on a level with this distinguished squatter's wife, whom she gushed over effusively.

"And you, too, Jenny!"—kissing the girl, who offered her cheek and not her lips to the salute. "I really thought you had gone home without coming to see us."

This was just what Jenny would have done, if left to her own devices, having no desire for intimacy with Aunt Emma or her family after the way they had treated her about the tea-room; and she made no reply.

Mrs. Oxenham answered for her, however. "I should not have allowed that, you may be sure. Aunts and cousins"—disregarding Jenny's protesting eyes—"are more to one than strangers."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Rogerson. "And I want to hear about my poor sister—poor thing! When we were girls together, and papa and mamma giving us every luxury that money could buy, I little thought what she was to come to, Mrs. Oxenham. And we believed she had made a good marriage too. Your father, Jenny, was an Eton boy."

"I know," said blushing Jenny, who often wished devoutly that her father had gone to a state school.

"Mr. Liddon was a gentleman," said Mary, "and his daughter takes after him. I'm sure I don't know what Mr. Oxenham and I will do without her when she leaves us. It is like having one of our own."

Mrs. Rogerson gushed afresh—over her niece this time; and two smart girl-cousins came in and gushed with her. They sat on either side of Jenny and held her hands, until one of them (Joey's adored one) got up to make the tea.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Rogerson. "She was always a favourite with us; we always knew she was a lady born, in spite of her absurd notions about tea-rooms and so forth—which, I must confess, *did* make us a little angry with her. You would have felt it yourself, Mrs. Oxenham, now wouldn't you? But, after all, blood is blood, isn't it? You can't alter that. Our own grandfather was nephew to a baronet—Sir Timothy Smith. You may have heard of him?"

Mrs. Oxenham said she did not remember to have done so—that perhaps he was before her time—and graciously took another cup of tea, which she declared was delicious.

"And now, when are you coming to us, Jenny?" Cousin Alice inquired. "Couldn't you come and spend the day to-morrow? And couldn't *you* come, Mrs. Oxenham? Our tennis club is having a tournament, and we are giving a tea on the ground—under nice shady trees, you know. It would be such an honour if you would come and look on at us."

"I'm afraid *I* couldn't," said Mary, with a pretence of thinking it over. "But Jenny, if she likes, I could send her in."

"Oh, yes! And couldn't she spend a few days with us when she was here? We have seen nothing of her. We could drive her back to Wandooyamba."

This was what Mrs. Oxenham had fished for, had roasted herself in the sun for, and she roused herself to deal with the timely opportunity. She looked at Jenny, and Jenny looked back at her with eyes that said "No" so unmistakably as to suggest the thought that perhaps she knew of Anthony's coming to the mind of the suspicious woman. This made her resolute.

"What do you say, dear?" she inquired genially; and in a moment Jenny understood that her friend wished her to accept the invitation, and was wondering in a startled way whether she had overstayed her welcome at Wandooyamba. "Don't consider us—we must not be selfish—and you will come back to us, of course. Dickson could drive you over when he goes for the letters, and that would give you the afternoon to see the tournament."

There was nothing to say but "thank you" all round, and Jenny said it with good taste, determined to bring her holiday to an end as soon as possible—not to return to Wandooyamba after leaving it, but to spend Christmas with her own too-long deserted family. Mary had an inkling of what was going on in the girl's mind, but said to herself that it couldn't be helped. Anthony must be saved at all hazards.

CHAPTER XVI

A STAR IN TWILIGHT

Mrs. Oxenham was immensely kind to Jenny when the pair were again upon the road.

"They seemed to want you so much, darling, and I thought your mother would wish you to show them some attention," she said. "But goodness knows what Harry and I will do without you! We shall be quite lost, and the children too, till you come back again."

"You are too good to me," murmured Jenny, half inclined to cry. "I think I am getting quite spoiled."

"Oh, no! You are not one of the spoilable sort," said Mary tenderly.

Jenny had but one portmanteau with her, and into this she packed all her belongings before starting off next day. Mr. Oxenham put it and her into the buggy with his own hands, and, because he was not directly responsible for her departure, bewailed it loudly.

"I call it too bad of you—downright mean, I call it—to run away from us like this, Miss Liddon," he said to her again and again, to the unconcealed irritation of his wife.

"You go on, Harry, as if she were leaving us for ever. We haven't seen the last of her yet—not by a long way, have we, dear?"

The parting guest was sped with warmest kisses and handclasps, and bidden vaguely to come back again soon. But as she stood up to wave her handkerchief to the children from the middle of the home paddock, looking back upon the great, rambling house, where she had had such a good time, she said to herself that she should go back no more. If matters had turned out differently she would have called her conviction of that moment a presentiment.

Aunt Emma and Cousins Clementine and Alice received her cordially, and at once began to pelt her with questions concerning the Oxenham household, and as to what she knew of the Churchills in town. Uncle John, the bank manager, lunching with his family, asked about Joey, and the state of the restaurant business, and other practical matters. In the afternoon she helped to carry cakes and cream jugs to the tennis-ground, and was there introduced to the rank and fashion of the town, not as "My cousin, who keeps the tea-room in Little Collins Street," but as "My cousin, who is staying with Mrs. Oxenham at Wandooyamba," and she sat under a tree and watched the players, and talked when she was obliged to talk, and, when she wasn't, thought her own thoughts, which were chiefly concerned in devising some way of getting home immediately.

The tennis-tea was followed by tea at the bank, composed of the remains of the former, with cold meat and eggs; and by-and-by the moon got up, and it was proposed that the young people should have a walk to enjoy the pleasant night. A bank-clerk and a bachelor lawyer, who had "dropped in," attached themselves to Clem and Alice, and Mrs. Rogerson and her niece soberly chaperoned the party, and talked family affairs together.

The night train from Melbourne came in at ten o'clock, and the little township loved to catch it in the act. All townships which have a train do. It is a never-failing joy to them. And, finding themselves in the neighbourhood of the station at about 9.35, the Rogerson girls exclaimed with one voice, "Let's stay and see the train come in."

The motion was carried unanimously, and for half an hour they loitered up and down the platform, looking into the vagueness of the moonlit night, and talking and laughing rather loudly; all but Jenny, who, though she was so much less genteel than these relations, did not think it good manners to make a noise. And so it came to pass that she presently saw a buggy dash into the station-yard, and recognised it as the one that had brought her in in the morning.

"That's to meet somebody," said Clem to Alice, with intense curiosity. "Jenny, who's expected at Wandooyamba to-night?"

"Nobody, that I know of," said Jenny. "They are always sending for parcels and things."

The train signalled from a distance, hummed through the still night, and clattered up to the platform, watched intently by all the eyes available. It was not the great express, but a local offshoot from it, and the passengers it disgorged at this point were not very numerous. The first to tumble out was a big man with a red beard.

"Oh! Oh! OH! It's Mrs. Oxenham's brother! It's Mr. Anthony Churchill! He hasn't been here for ages—they said he was in England. Oh, isn't he handsome? Oh, I wonder if he will come to the town at all? Oh, Jenny, just see what you have missed!"

Jenny drew back into the dim crowd, on which he cast no glance as he strode to the buggy, calling to a porter to bring his things. She said nothing, but she thought—it was a thought that stung like fire—"Now I know why I have been sent away from Wandooyamba."

Anthony's journey had been a pleasant one—especially the latter part of it, when the coolness of a dewy night had replaced the glare of day; smoking quietly, and meditating upon his prospects, he would not have changed places with a king. Since he had definitely made up his mind to marry Jenny, and since his father had admitted the wisdom of that proceeding, and consented to it, all seemed plain and clear before him; for he had no fear of Mary, who was the first to know her worth, and already treated her as a sister, and no fear at all that the girl herself would for a moment dream of refusing him. He was too deeply experienced in the signs and tokens of the supreme sentiment not to recognise it when he saw it, and he had seen it very plainly once or twice through the modest disguises that she flattered herself had screened it from him.

All the way up he had been thinking of her, imagining their meeting at Wandooyamba, and all that he would do on the morrow, which was Sunday, and a most beautiful day for love-making. He planned the time and circumstances of his marriage, and how the other Liddons should be disposed of while he was showing the world to his bride, and where he and she would live, and what sort of home they would have when they settled down after their travels. Being Saturday night, which passengers by the express who want to go all the way to Sydney don't choose for starting on that journey, if they can help it, he had room to put up his legs and make a rug pillow for his head; in which condition of bodily ease, his mind, so to speak, went out to play, and amused itself delightfully. Jenny would not have known herself had she seen how she was pictured in the fancies of his dreaming brain.

Needless to say, he never dreamed of seeing her on the platform when he arrived, and did not do so. At each of the country stations there was a lounging crowd to see the train come in, people to whom it was the chief entertainment in life, and who were a great nuisance occasionally to the hungry and thirsty traveller with but a few minutes in which to get his meal; but these had nothing to do with Jenny or with him, and were ignored as far as possible. He distinctly heard the "Oh's" of Clementine and Alice, and the sound of his name, and nothing was less likely to suggest the presence of his little sweetheart, with her shy refinement. He knew that a man would have been sent to meet the train, and looked for him and him only. In two minutes his rug and luggage were in the buggy, and the light vehicle spinning out of the town.

The groom was a youth who was not supposed to know anything about the inside of his master's house, and Anthony heard no news that interested him—except that Mr. Oxenham did not intend to drive Emily again with ladies and children behind her; which was a great relief to him. He lit his pipe afresh, and leaned back in his corner with arms folded, and thought of what was coming, in a mood of mind that he had imagined himself to have outgrown years and years ago. The night was very sweet and still, with its delicate mixture of moonlight and shadow; a night to make the most world-hardened man feel sentimental. And the spell of the lonely bush is very strong upon those who are native to it, when they have been away for a long time.

"There will be a moon again to-morrow night," he thought. "And all these leagues of solitude to lose ourselves in! It shall be settled to-morrow night, and then we will both stay for Christmas, while I teach her to get used to it. Oh, this is better than the Richmond lodgings, or the St. Kilda pier!"

Through the trees he saw a dark bank, crowned with a cluster of low roofs, uplifted from the valley pastures to the palely shining sky. He looked at it with kindling eyes, and thought of the little figure moving about the many rooms, in the atmosphere of cultured people—its native air—and how considerate and sagacious his sister Mary was. A light like a star stole out upon the hill, and another, and another. He hoped devoutly that Mary had not sent her charge to bed.

"What time do you make it, Pat?"

"About eleven, sir; not more."

Oh, that wasn't bed-time! And she was not ill now. Perhaps, however, she would make an excuse to retire, lest she should be in the way at the family meeting; it would be just like her. Perhaps she would go to bed to avoid him, out of pure shyness. The doubt worried him, for he had set his heart on seeing her that night—just to satisfy himself that she was really alive and well, and had not been forgetting to care for him during his long absence from her.

CHAPTER XVII

"YOU NEED NOT EXPECT ME BACK"

Harry Oxenham, pipe in mouth, stood at the open garden gate. Mary stood on the step of the front door. Conscious of guilt, they greeted him with more than usual cordiality.

"And so you have really come, after all, my dear old boy," his sister cried, with her arms about his neck. "This *is* good of you! A piece of luck that I *never* expected!"

"Yes, I've come. Awfully glad to get into clean air, out of those stinking streets. How are the kids? Why didn't you let me come last night?"

"Oh, the kids are as right as possible. You won't know them, they have grown so. Of course they are in bed and asleep, or they would be pulling you down between them."

She was hoping the tiresome brats wouldn't begin to talk of Jenny the first thing in the morning, and he was anxiously peering over her shoulder.

"Why did you stop me yesterday, Polly?"

"Oh, for reasons—never mind now, as long as you are here. Come in and have some supper. You must be hungry and tired after your long journey. Did you bring me some fish? Oh, thanks. It will be a treat, after weeks of Murray cod."

He followed her across the hall into the dining-room, where half the table was spread with a tempting meal. He looked around; there was no one there. He looked at Mary, and he thought she blushed.

"Where is Miss Liddon?" he inquired coolly. "Has she gone to bed?"

This time Mary blushed unmistakably. She exchanged a faltering glance with her husband, who sidled out of the room; then she rallied her dignity, and quietly replied that Miss Liddon was not with her.

"She was here two days ago," said Tony darkly.

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how I know it. Only I do, for a certainty."

"Not from me; I have told nobody. If *she* has been writing to you,"—Mrs. Oxenham, gentle woman that she was, flared up at the thought—"all I can say is that I am shockingly deceived in her."

"She never wrote to me in her life. But that's neither here nor there. The fact remains that she was in this house two days ago, and is out of it now. What have you done with her?"

There was an irritating abruptness in his tone and manner, and his sister threw up her head with a haughty gesture.

"*I?* Is she a child, that anybody should do anything with her? She has some relations living in the town, and has gone to stay with them."

"When did she go?"

"Oh, my dear Tony, you are too absurd! And I don't choose to be catechised in this fashion. Miss Liddon is nothing to you."

"That's all you know about it. When did she go, Mary?"

He looked hard at her, and she at him, and she held her breath for a moment, trying to grasp the situation.

"She went this morning."

"And knew that I was coming to-night?"

"How can I tell? I did not think it necessary to talk about it to her."

"You mean you kept it from her? And that you contrived that she should go to her relations—having put me off to give you time to do it—so as to have her out of my way. I know about those relations. They have snubbed and spurned her in her struggles, like the cads they are, and she can't endure them."

"They have been exceedingly attentive to her, and had asked her to visit them a dozen times. They proposed to-day themselves."

"I have it from her sister. And also that she was expecting to stay on here. It was in a letter, dated two days ago. I read it. Mary, it seems to me that you have behaved abominably. You simply turned her out."

"Tony, I will not allow you to talk to me like that. And just let me ask *you* one question:—Supposing I did, what in the world can it matter to you?"

"Well, I came up on purpose to see her, that's all."

"Oh! You are very complimentary to us. But you don't mean that, of course. *You!* A man in your position can't possibly have any concern with a girl in hers; at least, you have no business to have any."

"That's worthy of Maude, Polly. In fact, the very words she said to me yesterday."

"Maude? What does she know about it? Tony, you are talking riddles. I can't understand you in the least."

"Oh, Maude knows. So does my father. But *he* doesn't say those insulting things. He says I have

made a wise choice—as I know I have—and has given us his consent and blessing in advance. Do you understand now?"

She understood, and was momentarily stunned. Not Lady Louisa, after all, but this little no-account tea-room girl! It was a heavy shock. She dropped into a chair, flung herself back in it, and ejaculated, "*Well!*"—adding with a long breath, "And she never gave me the least hint of it all this time!"

"She couldn't very well, seeing that she hasn't the faintest idea of such a thing herself—to the best of my knowledge."

"Then"—eagerly—"you have not spoken yet?"

"I am going to speak as soon as I can find her. And you are not going to prevent me, though you may think you are."

He poured out some whisky, and began to survey the dishes on the table. He was very angry, and consequently calm.

"Where's Harry?" he inquired. "I ordered the new buggy yesterday. I want to tell him about it. Harry, where are you?"

Harry came in, sheepish, but blustering, and was delighted to go into the buggy question without delay. They sat down to supper, and the men discussed business matters throughout the meal. Then Mr. Oxenham faint-heartedly proposed a smoke.

"No, thank you," said Anthony. "I'm off to bed. Same room, Mary?"

"Yes, dear." She followed him into the hall. "Aren't you going to say good-night to me, Tony?"

He kissed her coldly in silence.

"I did not know," she whispered. "It is so sudden—so unexpected. We will talk it over to-morrow, Tony."

"There's nothing to talk over," said he. And he marched off.

Mrs. Oxenham went to bed and cried. Then she thought deeply for a long time. Then she woke her husband up to talk to him.

"After all," she said, "it might have been worse. Some men, gentlemen of the highest class, marry barmaids and actresses—the vulgarest creatures. And Jenny isn't vulgar. However unsuitable she may be in other ways, personally she is a lady. That's one comfort. And—and it's very noble of him, don't you think?"

She got up early in the morning, and wrote to Jenny.

"DEAR CHILD,—

"My brother came last night, and was in a great way to find you gone. Ask your aunt to be good enough to spare you again to us, for I want you to help me to entertain him. We are talking of a picnic to the ranges, and could not manage that without you. I am sending Dickson with the buggy. Come back with him, and your aunt can have you later.

"Your affectionate friend,

"MARY OXENHAM."

This note was delivered at the bank at breakfast time, with the message that the man was waiting for an answer. Jenny took it to her room, read it, and penned the following reply with a violently shaking hand:—

"DEAR MRS. OXENHAM,—

"Thank you very much for your kindness in wishing me to return to you, but I think I ought not to prolong my holiday further, now that I am quite strong again. I am sure they must be badly wanting me at home, and I have decided to go back to-morrow, with some friends of my aunt's who happen to be going down. I could not leave her to-day, as I have but just come, and the time is so short. I am very sorry you should have had the trouble of sending the buggy for nothing. Please accept my grateful thanks for all your kindness, which I shall never forget, and believe me,—

"Yours sincerely,

"JENNY LIDDON."

Anthony at Wandooyamba was restless and surly. Mary had always been his ally in everything, and these devoted ones are the people we have no compunction about punishing severely when they do happen inadvertently to offend us. He would not forgive her for sending Jenny away.

"Can you lend me a horse, Harry?" was the first thing he said on coming down to breakfast—before he had even noticed the children, whom he had not seen for so long.

"A dozen, my dear fellow, if you want them," said Harry.

"Thank you. I only want one."

Mary leaned over the table and whispered to him, "Wait a little. She is coming back to-day."

"Have you sent for her?" he asked, lifting his eyebrows.

She nodded.

He shook his head. "She will know what she was turned out for, and she won't come back."

"She will—she will," said Mary, who devoutly hoped it. "Wait till Dickson returns, at any rate."

Dickson had a wife and family in the township, and when he found that he had not to drive the young lady to Wandooyamba, he concluded that he need not hurry home, but might take his ease in his own house, as he was accustomed to do on the day of rest; so he pocketed Jenny's letter until the evening. When he then delivered it—at past six o'clock—he was very much surprised and offended at being taken to task for presuming to exercise his own judgment in the matter. He little knew what the consequences had been to Mr. Churchill's temper and his mistress's peace of mind. Tony was a handful that day, and sincerely did Mary regret having tried to play Providence to him.

She went to church with her family—to her own little bush church which her own money maintained; the parson, ritual, and general affairs of which were wholly under her direction—hoping to find the lovers together on her return. In the afternoon they all walked for miles on the track of the expected buggy, and walked back again, casting wistful looks behind them. Then Dickson came leisurely ambling home—they saw him from the verandah sitting in solitary state—and Jenny's letter was delivered and the suspense ended.

Mary tore it open, read it with distress, almost with tears, and handed it to her brother. He perused it with a grim smile, put it into his pocket, and ordered a horse to be saddled immediately.

"What, at *this* hour?" she cried.

"I have wasted too many," he answered stiffly. "Good-night. You need not expect me back again."

CHAPTER XVIII

JENNY IS TREATED LIKE A LADY

That night the Rogersons went to church in a body, as usual, for they were a churchy family. Mrs. Rogerson was that power in the congregation which only a self-asserting, middle-aged, highly-respectable female of pronounced religious views can be, and fully recognised her responsibilities as such; knew that she was expected to set an example, and believed that the parochial machine would certainly get out of gear if she did not keep a constant eye upon it. Alice and Clementine were both in the choir, and particularly indispensable to it of an evening, when anthems were performed. Mr. Rogerson carried round the plate and counted the money in the vestry—most important function and functionary of them all. When the early tea was disposed of, and the table prepared for the substantial supper which was the concluding ceremony of the day, whereat the minister and several leading church members assisted, the family put on their best bonnets, and brushed their hats, and went forth to their devotions, leaving a godless young clerk, with a cigar and a novel, to keep guard over the bank's treasure in their absence.

Leaving also Jenny—not with the young bank-clerk, who was invisible, but on a sofa in the hot drawing-room upstairs, complaining of a headache, which she had legitimately come by through exciting her little soul over Mrs. Oxenham's letter and the perplexing questions that it raised. They had urged her to go to church, that she might hear the anthem and see how well they did things, but her intense craving to be alone to think gave her strength to resist their importunities. She was provided with Drummond's *Natural Law* and a smelling-bottle, and left in peace.

Just as the church bells were silenced by the striking of the town clock, Mr. Churchill reached the principal hotel; and he quickly unpacked the small valise he had carried on his saddle, washed and brushed, and fortified himself with whisky and a biscuit, in lieu of his lost dinner, which he had not time to think of now. And at about the moment when Clementine began her solo in the anthem he rang the bell at the bank door. Somebody, he knew, would be upon the premises, and he was prepared to explain the object of his visit to any whom it might concern.

The young clerk thought of burglars, and was at first reluctant, but, on recognising the untimely caller, admitted the great man, and did what in him lay to be obliging. Jenny heard the ring and the little stir in the hall, but took no notice. She was entirely absorbed in wondering why Mrs. Oxenham wanted to throw her at Mr. Churchill's head to-day, after taking such extreme measures to remove her from him yesterday; and why Mr. Churchill, supposed to be engaged to Lady Louisa, should be in "a great way" because he had not found at Wandooyamba the girl of whom he had taken no notice while they were both in town and he was at liberty to interview her

at any time. She was lying all along on a sofa, with her arms thrown up and her hands under her head. Her little figure was clad in a white gown—a costume insisted on by Mrs. Oxenham in this midsummer weather. The light from the window beside her touched her chestnut hair and her pure skin and her bright eyes, that were fixed in deep abstraction upon the wall. If she had posed to look her prettiest, she could not have succeeded better.

A heavy step came up the stairs, and she did not stir, for *she* had no thought of burglars. Not until it slackened and paused at the open door of the drawing-room, threatening an intrusion upon her precious hour of peace, did she turn her head apprehensively. When she saw who it was that stood there, looking at her, she bounded to her feet as if she had been shot.

"Oh—h—h!" she breathed almost inaudibly.

"Miss Liddon, I am so glad to find you at home."

He was as sober as one could desire that a gentleman should be, but probably it was whisky on an empty stomach which made him bold at a time when most men are liable to be daunted; for, seeing her standing there, trembling, cowering, but visibly glowing from head to foot, he made up his mind that then and there would he settle the great question between them. No, not *there*. As he took his resolution, he remembered how short the evening service is, though it may not seem so to the persons taking part in it, and how horrible it would be to be disturbed in the middle of his proposal by the Rogersons and the parson and half a dozen gossips of the township coming in. So he said to Jenny, holding her hand very firmly, "As you wouldn't come to Wandooyamba, I have been obliged to come to you. I have something of great importance to say to you; and I want to know if you will come out for a little walk on the hills with me? It is not very hot now."

Jenny's colour deepened, and her tremblings increased. She withdrew her hand. "There is no one here," she said.

"But there will be soon. And I have a great deal to tell you—I want to be free to talk. Come out for a walk. Your aunt won't object when she knows it is I who am with you. Go and put your hat on—quick."

She hesitated still. "It is not—not anything the matter? Not anybody ill? Nothing wrong at home?"

"No, no! Make haste and get ready, or they will be back before we can get away."

She ran off to her room, and there stood still for a minute, clenching her hands and drawing long breaths that shook her little frame. Thoughts raced too fast to be followed, but if she could not think she could feel. If she could not understand him she was sure she could trust him; his sister's endorsement of his proceedings was a guarantee of that. She put on her hat, snatched up a pair of gloves, and returned to him speechless.

"You don't want gloves," he said, and took them from her, and laid them on a table on the landing. They went downstairs, and the young clerk let them out of the iron-lined door.

"You can tell Mrs. Rogerson that I will bring Miss Liddon home safely," said Anthony, with the air of a lawful guardian. It was nearly eight o'clock, and daylight was fading fast. He had an idea that there would be a moon, which would make a walk on the hills delicious, forgetting that the moon was not due for another hour and a half. Jenny had no ideas upon the subject; she left all to him.

Immediately behind the township the rocky ranges began to rise and to break like waves into little valleys and gorges that were as lonely as a desert island, though so near the haunts of men. He knew all their ins and outs, and in his own mind had marked the group of boulders where he and Jenny would sit while he asked her to marry him. He had found it years before, when out on a picnic; it had wattle-feathered rock on three sides of it, and in front the ground fell into a ravine that opened the whole way to the sunset. Two quiet streets, a lane, and a rather weary mountain path led to this airy solitude, and one could reach it with steady walking in a little over half-an-hour. One might have thought it would certainly be occupied or invaded on a Sunday night, with so many wanderers abroad, but as a fact the townspeople cared nothing for the beautiful scenery at their doors, and did not go into the ranges from year's end to year's end. Anthony knew that, and chanced finding his eyrie untenanted.

Through the streets where 'Arry and 'Arriet were strolling on the footpaths and flirting over their garden gates, he led his spell-bound companion, chatting commonplaces by the way.

"You know that I have been absent from town?" he said.

She replied that she had not known it till the other day.

"Yes, for several weeks. And I had no idea you were here all this time. Of course I got no letters at sea."

"The sea must have been delicious in the hot weather," remarked Jenny, thinking of her sufferings during the Cup season in the stifling air of Little Collins Street.

"No, it wasn't. At least, I did not enjoy it. I daresay the sea was right enough; I might have enjoyed it in other company."

"But I thought your company—Mrs. Oxenham told me——"

"What did Mrs. Oxenham tell you?" But he divined what it was. "That there was a lady on board whom I was specially interested in?"

"She thought you were engaged to her."

"Oh, did she? People have no business to *think* about those matters; they ought to *know*, before they talk. That lady was just about the last woman in the world to suit me. And they bored me to death—the whole lot of them."

Jenny's heart leaped in her breast, but still she did not dare to ask herself what his words and his visit portended. They had begun to climb the mountain pathway, a devious and stony track through wattle bushes and gum saplings, and it had grown almost too dark to see his face.

"Have we not gone far enough?" she asked him, pausing.

"It is the scrub that shuts the light out," he said quickly. "And there will be a moon directly. Just a little further, and we shall get the breeze from the top. Does it tire you? Let me help you up."

He offered his arm, but she declined it. She was not tired, but nervous about being out so late and so far from home.

"Not with me," he said; and added, "There's nothing clandestine about it. Mrs. Rogerson knows—at any rate, she will when I take you home—and so does Mary."

"Does Mrs. Oxenham know that I am walking here with you?" she was impelled to inquire, breathlessly.

"Most certainly she does."

Jenny climbed on blindly, with her head spinning round. Presently they reached the top, and the cool air blew in their faces. The town, the inhabited world, was behind them, cut off by a granite wall and the obliteration of the track in the gloom of night; in front the ravine stretched away to the pale saffron of the west, and, looking in that direction, it did not seem that day was over yet.

"Now I must find you a place to sit and rest yourself," said Anthony. "Take my hand over these rough stones."

Her hand shook, and so did his; his voice had begun to sound a little breathless, like hers. His exultation was mounting to his head, and something like terror was making her heart quake. "Ought I to have allowed him? Ought I to have done it?" she was asking herself. But it was too late for such questions now, and all doubts were settled within the next five minutes.

"Here," he said. "This is the place. A flat stone to sit on, and the sloping rock to lean against. Generally the rocks slope the wrong way, but this slants back at the right angle exactly. Sit down here; you must be tired after that climb. I will fan you with a wattle branch." He began to break off boughs, while she sat down, because her knees trembled so that it was difficult to stand. "Isn't this a charming view? At sunset it is magnificent, when the tops of the ranges turn pink and then indigo, like velvet. Can you hear the trickle of the creek down there? It seems miles below us, in that depth of shadow, doesn't it? And that humming sound—listen! It is a waterfall. What is the noise like? Oh, I know—like a railway train in the distance. And the wind in the gum leaves—can't you shut your eyes and imagine that is the sea? Do you remember that night on the St Kilda pier, when you were so frightened? You are not afraid of me now, Jenny?"

He flung himself on the ground beside her, and tossed his hat away.

"Yes, I am," she said, springing to her feet, and turning eastward towards the town. "And I *must* go home, Mr. Churchill; it is not right for me to be out here at this hour. You should not have brought me. It is not treating me like—like a lady," she burst out, in a tone of reproach and distress which reminded him that he had not yet given her proper notice of his intentions.

He sprang upright in an instant, and caught her arm, and, before she knew it, had both his arms around her.

"Don't you understand?" he exclaimed, in a deep voice. "I thought you did—I thought Sarah would have told you. And my coming in this way—my dragging you up here, to get you to myself—and Mary's letter—oh, my poor little woman, you *didn't* think I was making an amusement of it, *did* you? That's not treating me like a gentleman, Jenny."

"But you can't—"

"I can—I do. I want you to marry me, Jenny—there it is; and you can't misunderstand now. And, what's more, all my family know it, too, and my father says he's glad, and told me to tell you that he says so. And Mary is awfully sorry that she sent you away yesterday. And you—you won't say 'No'? It may be cheek and impudence to mention it, but I've seen it in your dear little eyes a score of times."

"Oh, *what* have you seen?" she asked, gasping, laughing, crying, thrilling, all dazed and overwhelmed in this sea of joy.

"This," he answered, stooping his head and putting a hand under her chin. "Take off your hat, Jenny, so that I can kiss you comfortably."

CHAPTER XIX

WOMAN'S RIGHTS REFUSED

The transcendent minutes passed, and presently found them sitting under their sloping rock, talking with some measure of sense and self-possession. Both heads were uncovered, and, as Anthony had anticipated, gloves were not required. The saffron sky had hardly a vestige of colour left, stars were out overhead, the gorge at their feet might have been the valley of death itself, so impenetrably deep and dark it looked, with the steep, black hills heaving out of it. Through the delicate air came a faint chime from far away behind them, the clock at the post office striking nine.

"Ought we not to go?" whispered Jenny.

"No, darling. We couldn't go if we tried. On the other side it would be too dark to see a step; we should only lose ourselves. We must wait for the moon."

"It won't be long, will it?"

"About half an hour. Aren't you content to sit here with me? We shall be home before eleven."

She was quite content. Her head was not high enough to reach his shoulder—it rested on his breast; he tucked away his beard that it might not tickle her face. His own face he laid on her brown hair, or stroked that hair with a big, soft hand. His arm supported her little frame; it was so little and so light that he was afraid to hug it much, for fear he should crush it.

"What a ridiculous mite it is!" he murmured. "If you are tired, Jenny, I can carry you home quite easily."

She said she was not tired.

"But you have been tired, my poor little girl! When I think of what you have been doing, all this hot summer, while I have been loafing around and amusing myself—! However, that won't happen again."

"And yet you never came to the tea-room to see how I was getting on—not for such a long, long time!"

"And don't you know why that was? Mary found me going, and scolded me for it, because she said it was compromising you. It was for fear that I might do that—that only—that I kept away. Whereby, you see, I have *always* treated you like a lady—from the very beginning. Oh, Jenny, that *was* an unkind thing to say!"

"But how was I to know? And you were so far above me——"

He put his hand over her mouth.

"But still I *do* think," she proceeded, when the impediment was removed, "I do think it *was* cheek and impudence to make so sure. It's like a Sultan and his slave—like Ahasuerus and Esther. And I never *did* run after you—you know I never, never did!"

Her voice was smothered in his moustache.

"Poor little mite! No more it did! It was the very pink and pattern of all that was proper. And yet I knew it—I knew it, Jenny, just as certainly as if you had said, 'I love you' in so many words."

"You had no business to know it—and you *couldn't*."

"I could and did. You shouldn't have eyes so clear that one can see your heart through them." He kissed the lids down over them, and held them shut for a space. "And you are not ashamed of it, are you?"

"I should have been ashamed if I had known it before, but I'm not now." She stole an arm round his bent neck. "But you won't hold me cheap by-and-by, because I gave myself away so easily, and was so far be——"

Again he laid his hand over her mouth. "I can't very well do it now," he said gravely, "but when I am your husband, and you say things like that to me, I shall simply smack you, Jenny."

He lifted her into a sitting posture, and fumbled in all his pockets.

"Oh, here it is," drawing forth the ring he had purchased in Melbourne. "You can't see it by this light, but it's the very nicest I could find. Neat, but not gaudy, you know. It has a pearl in it, threaded on a gold wire because it's so big, as white and pure as your own dear little soul. Yes, I got it on purpose—so you see how sure I was of getting *you*. Don't let its poor little pride be hurt. You couldn't have helped it, you know, anyhow; because, if you hadn't given yourself, I should have taken you as a matter of course, as the giant took Tom Thumb."

"I don't think you would," said Jenny.

"You don't? Well, perhaps not I believe you are a match for any giant, you little epitome of pluck!"

By-and-by we'll see. In the meantime let me put this on your finger, and tell me if it's the right fit."

He put it on, and it was exactly the right fit.

"*There!* By whatever means I have got you, you are mine from this moment—signed, sealed, and delivered." He lifted the little hand, and kissed the ring reverently. "Till death us do part."

She kissed it after him, and then flung herself on his breast, where he held her, closely and in silence, until the moon rose and gave them light enough to find their way home.

After all, it was past eleven before they arrived; for the right track was difficult to find while the moon was shut off from it by the tall scrub, and its many pitfalls had to be encountered with care. Hand in hand, and cautious step by step, the affianced lovers came down from their mount of transfiguration, and could hardly believe their ears when, still high above the town, they counted the chimes that told them they had been more than three hours together.

"Never mind," said Anthony. "In for a penny, in for a pound. And we shall be able to give a good account of ourselves when we do get back."

"Shall you give an account to-night?" she asked.

"Certainly. In the first place, to justify this expedition; in the second, to prove my right to take you home to-morrow, and otherwise to control the situation. Isn't that what you wish?"

She assented with a pressure of his hand. "When I see my aunt's face—when I see them all knocked backwards by the shock—then perhaps I shall believe in the miracle of being engaged to you," she said. And he replied with truth, that if she didn't believe it now, it was not his fault.

The aunt's face it was which met them at the bank door. Mrs. Rogerson believed that a deliberate assignation had been planned—and that on a Sunday, when respectable young folks should have been at church—and was properly concerned and scandalised. At the same time she was deeply interested and flattered by the fact that it was Mr. Churchill who thus took liberties with her household; and she felt there were mysteries to be unravelled before she could decide upon any course of action. She fell upon Jenny first, and her voice was a decided reprimand.

"My *dear* child! where *have* you been? And *do* you know what time it is?" Then with a gush, "Oh, Mr. Churchill, this *is* an unexpected pleasure! Won't you walk in?"

He shook hands and walked in. "I am afraid it's late," he said; "but you must blame me, not Jenny. I took her for a little turn to see if the air would do her headache good, and it got dark before we knew it, and we lost our way. But I knew you would not be anxious, knowing she was with me."

"Oh, no—certainly. Do come in. My husband will be so pleased to see you. You are quite a stranger in these parts."

She led the way to the dining-room, where an entirely new supper had been arranged, on purpose for him, and where he was impressively received by the urbane father and his fluttering daughters.

"Our friends are gone, Jenny," said Clementine, all eyes for the great man. "And Mrs. Simpson was so anxious to see you—to tell you she was going down by Tuesday morning's train instead of to-morrow afternoon."

"Oh!" said Anthony, "that doesn't matter. I am going down myself to-morrow afternoon, and I'll take care of Jenny. I know she is anxious to get home—aren't you, dear?"

It was like an electric shock striking through the room. The eyes of the startled family interrogated each other and Jenny's blushing face.

"Oh, it's quite proper," said Anthony lightly, "since we are engaged people—engaged with the consent of our families, moreover. She could not have a more eligible escort. *Is* that chicken-pie, Miss Rogerson? May I have some? I came away from Wandooyamba without my dinner, and I am simply ravenous."

The effect of the plain statement was all that Jenny had anticipated. They were so stupefied for the moment that they could only gape and stare, marvelling at the inscrutable ways of Providence and the incalculable caprices of rich men. Perhaps the first sensation was one of personal chagrin, in that the virtue of consistent gentility had gone unrewarded, while the enormity of a tea-room was so unjustly condoned; but personal pride in the prospective connection was the permanent and predominating sentiment. Exclamations, questions, interjections, kisses, hugs, wrapped Jenny as in a whirlwind; while her lover calmly ate his pie and drank his bottled ale, as if it were an old story that interested him no longer. He was not ashamed to ask for a second helping.

"And you never saw her on the platform last night?" said Clem archly, as she waited upon him.

"Good heavens, no! What platform?"

"Our platform. She must have known you were coming—I know she saw you jump out of the carriage—and she never made a sign! And she's never given us the faintest hint at all!"

"That's her native modesty. And there are some things one doesn't talk about, you know—except

to one's nearest and dearest."

"Who can be nearer than we?" demanded Mrs. Rogerson, caressing her niece.

"Oh, I don't know," he drawled carelessly. "There's nothing in being mere relatives. I don't tell things to my relatives, and—a—you have not been so *very* intimate, you know—at least, not since I've known her."

An uncomfortable pause was broken by a protest from Alice, who was given to the saying of things that were better left unsaid. "I'm sure, never—until the tea-room—"

The mention of that bone of strife brought angry blushes to the family cheek, and glares which stopped her from going further.

"Don't speak ill of the tea-room, if you please," he said. "It is the most admirable institution that I know. But for the tea-room I should not have found my pattern wife—should not have known half her good qualities."

Jenny's intimacy with *him*—years old since eight o'clock—made her fearless of what she said or did, and, as has been intimated before, she was a person of spirit, with a good deal of human nature in her. She moved to his side, laid her hand on his shoulder for a moment, and said, with an ineffable air of self-justification, "*He* is not ashamed of the tea-room."

"On the contrary, dear, I am proud of it," he responded quickly, touching the little hand.

"Nevertheless," proceeded Jenny, "I will give it up now. It has been a success—I have earned a great deal of money—but I will dispose of it when I go home."

"We needn't talk about these things now," said Anthony, with a slight frown.

"But, my dear sir," the urbane uncle interposed, "I am her natural guardian, don't you see. Joseph is a good boy—a very superior youth, in fact—but he is *only* a boy. It is my duty, as her nearest male relative, standing in the place of her father, to attend to her affairs at this juncture."

"I merely wanted to say," proceeded Jenny, with an air of resolution, "that I wish to please those who have been so good to me—who have not despised me because of what I did to make a living. I will not wait in the tea-room again—for their sakes; and of course my mother and sister must not work there without me. I will think of something else, that shall not—not be disagreeable to anybody."

"You don't want to think any more, Jenny," said Anthony quietly. "I am going to do the thinking now."

"Still," urged Mrs. Rogerson, with tardy generosity and misguided zeal, "we can't allow *you* to be saddled with my sister and her children, Mr. Churchill. They must not live on *your* money."

"They won't," said Jenny.

"I know they won't," said Anthony, "if they are made of the same stuff as you. But please leave all that now, dear. And go to bed, or you will be tired for your journey to-morrow."

On the way to his hotel he confounded the impudence of her relatives in many bad words, and laughed at the notion that she was going to "boss" the family arrangements as heretofore.

CHAPTER XX

SHE CARES NOT

Next morning, while he was sitting with his *fiancée* in the bank drawing-room, the ladies of the house having discreetly pleaded domestic engagements, Mrs. Oxenham was announced—to see Miss Liddon.

Jenny rose from the sofa, pale and palpitating. Anthony neither moved nor spoke, but watched his sister narrowly.

"I have come," said Mary; and then she stopped, and held out her arms. Jenny rushed into them, sobbing; and it was made evident that all opposition was at an end, as far as this Churchill was concerned.

"I am not *de trop*, am I?" she inquired, with a tremulous laugh. "You don't mind my sitting here with you for a few minutes, do you, Tony?"

He got up, and solemnly kissed her. "You are a good old girl, Polly," he said, in a deep voice. "Sit down, and tell us that you wish us joy—it's about the only thing that could make us happier than we are already."

"I came on purpose," she replied, "to wish you joy, dears, and to fetch you both back to Wandooyamba. Jenny, you will come back to me, my darling? I understand now—I didn't before. And Harry—he is your devoted admirer, you must know—he commissioned me to say that he

expects you."

Jenny looked at her lover, who shook his head.

"Can't," he said. "We have telegraphed to her mother, and have arranged to go down by this afternoon's train."

"Oh, no, Tony!"

"Yes, Polly! we can't put it off now. I must see her mother. And we are going to close the tea-room, and—and lots of things. But we can come back again."

Mrs. Oxenham was then prevailed on to wait to see them off, and the Rogersons sent out for champagne that lunch might be served in a style befitting the occasion. Having made up her mind to support Tony, there was nothing Mary would not do to please him; and she fraternised with Jenny's relatives, invited them to Wandooyamba, drove them to the station, and otherwise effaced herself and her social prejudices, in the spirit of a generous woman who is also a born lady. On the platform she kissed the lovers in turn, regardless of spectators.

"I declare," she said, aside to her brother, "it is ridiculous of you two to be going away like this; you should have gone alone, Tony, and left Jenny with me."

He laughed derisively.

"You could have come back for her when you had seen her mother, or I could have brought her down. You look exactly like a bride and bridegroom starting off on their honeymoon, with all this party seeing you off."

"We'll be that when we come back again," said he.

"Oh, I hope you are not going to put off coming to me till then!"

He laughed again, and dropped his voice. "I'm going to take her to Europe, Polly, and we must sail not later than March, you know, on account of the Red Sea, and the English spring, which I don't want her to miss."

"*Tony!* You are *not* going off again, before we've hardly got you back!"

"She has never seen the world, as we have, and I'm going to show it to her. It's what her little heart is set on. And time she had some pleasure, after all her hard work."

"Ah, ah! 'She' will be everything, now!"

"She won't be everything, but she'll be first. Where is she, by the way? Come, little one, jump in."

Jenny stepped into a small compartment of the ancient carriages provided for this unimportant branch line, and he sprang in after her. Though it was close to Christmas, and other compartments were fairly full, they had this one to themselves—whether by fair means or foul did not transpire. As soon as they were off Anthony proceeded to unfold in detail the plans he had been hatching through the night, because, he said, the main line train would be crowded, and he might not have another opportunity.

"We'll go abroad, Jenny, first, and then settle——"

"But I am not going to desert my family all in a moment, as you seem to think," she protested. "Indeed, indeed I cannot——"

He simply put his hand over her mouth.

"It won't take very long, and I shall want to have a house preparing for us to come to when we get back. I shall want to feel that we have a home, all the same—for we may get tired of wandering at any minute. And this is a thing one can't leave to other people. One must choose for one's self. So I shall at once look round for a nice place—Hush, Jenny! Don't interrupt me when I'm speaking, it's rude—and then I shall see if I can't persuade your mother and sister to look after it for us. You see, we shall be sending home furniture and all sorts of odds and ends from different places as we travel about, and we shall want somebody we can trust to receive the things and take care of them. I hardly like to ask such a favour of her, but for your sake I believe your mother would like the job; and I daresay she will feel lonesome with nothing to do when the tea-room is shut up. I shall take passages *immediately*, because berths are bespoken months before at this time of year. For February, if possible."

Jenny gasped. "Oh, talk of cheek and impudence—! Am I not to have any say at all?"

"Certainly not. An infinitesimal little mite like you!"

"You seem to think that, because I am small, I'm not to be counted as a woman with a will of her own."

"Oh, no. But you have had your turn of bossing people and managing things. Now I'm going to have mine, and you must submit to be bossed in your turn. Do you see? That's only fair."

The sort of bossing that she received that day was too delicious for words. After her long toil and struggle to take care of others, the being cared for herself, in this strong and tender fashion, was perhaps the sweetest experience she ever had in her life. The main line train was crowded, but

no one crowded her. Refreshments, such as they were, were produced without any trouble to herself, whenever she wanted them. But the charm of all was to sit beside him, content and peaceful, and know that she had nothing to do or to fear—that the combined world was powerless to touch her through the shield of his protection.

Jarvis was at Spencer Street, and took her luggage and instructions what to do with it. A hansom was waiting for his master, and into this he put Jenny, and drove her home through the gas-lit streets to her impatient mother and sister.

Mrs. Liddon had been prepared by Sarah for the tale they had to tell; nevertheless, she wept with joy when she heard it, and was particularly enchanted to know that her sister Emma had been properly taught not to look down on them that were as good as herself and better. Likewise she thanked God that Joey's future was assured. And she folded her eldest daughter to her breast, and declared that Mr. Churchill had got a treasure, though she said it that shouldn't; and bade him forgive her for being an old fool and crying over it, when she was really that happy that she didn't know if she stood on her head or her heels.

The tea-room had long been closed, and she had had time to exercise her special talents in the production of a charming supper, to the excellence of which he testified in the only satisfactory way. He ate largely, and remarked that he had never enjoyed anything more in his life.

"Well, I never enjoyed cooking things more," she said; and added, rather pathetically, "I must say I do get a little tired of making nothing but scones, day after day."

"You shall not make any more," said Jenny. "We are going to talk to Mrs. Allonby in the morning, and see if she will not take over the tea-room, and set us free."

"She'll be only too glad to jump at the chance," said Mrs. Liddon proudly, "if we make the terms reasonable. But, ah!"—shaking her head—"she'll never make scones like I do."

CHAPTER XXI

THE BEST AVAILABLE

So quickly did Jenny, aided by her impetuous lover, effect the transfer of her business, that she was out of it before Christmas Day. The basket-maker's wife had the benefit of the holiday custom, and the ex-proprietors the pleasant consciousness of having laboured successfully, in every sense of the word, and being now entitled to that rest and recreation which only those who have worked well can appreciate. They were all glad to be free. They had not realised the severity of the constant strain until it was removed, and wondered that people who could spend their days as they pleased were not more grateful for the privilege.

"And now," said Anthony, "I want you all to be my guests for Christmas. A friend has lent me his yacht, and we will go for a cruise wherever you like—inside the Bay or outside—according to how you stand it. Sarah is looking thin—she wants taking right out of this air; and the mother will not be the worse for a sea blow after living at the oven-mouth so long. Tell Joe to bring a mate—any male friend he likes. I have invited one of my own—a very good fellow—who wants to know you. Jenny, is a day long enough to get ready in? You don't want any finery."

"Quite," she replied, for she had been previously acquainted with this plan for enabling him and her to enjoy long days together; and she set to work to pack for the family with her business-like promptitude.

While thus engaged she was called into their little parlour to receive a visit from Mr. Churchill. The old gentleman presented himself in his most benevolent aspect, bearing a bouquet of flowers; and, while Jenny could hardly speak for blushing gratitude, he asked her if she would give an old man a kiss, and secured her doting affection for ever by that gracious recognition of her new rights.

"And so you are going to be my daughter," he said, patting her head. "Well, well!"

"I know I am unworthy of him," murmured Jenny.

"Oh, not at all! Just at first, perhaps—But then fathers are old fools. They never do think anything good enough for their children. I am quite pleased, my dear—quite satisfied and pleased. I am proud of my son for making such a choice. He has looked for true worth, rather than a brilliant match. Not many young men in his position have the discernment, the—a—what shall I say?"

"I have no worth," repeated Jenny, who really thought so, "compared with him. I know I am not fit for him."

"Tut, tut! He says differently, and so do I. It's your gallant conduct since your father's death, my dear—that's what it is. And I'm proud of my boy, to think he can fall in love for such a cause. He's got a bit of his mother in him—a good seed that hasn't been choked with riches and—and so on. The more I think of it the more I approve of him. We had an idea of marrying him to a lady of

title, and making a great swell of him; but there—it's best as it is. A good wife is above rubies, doesn't the Bible say?—something like it—a crown to her husband, eh? You'll make a good wife, I'll warrant, and, after all, that's the main thing."

"I will indeed," declared Jenny solemnly, "if love and trying can do it—though I shall never be good enough for him."

"Oh, he's not an angel, any more than other men; I know that, though he is my son, and a good son too. You mustn't disparage yourself, Sally—isn't your name Sally?—no, Jenny, of course—nice, old-fashioned name. You are his equal, as I have been telling Mrs. Churchill—but these young ladies go so much by appearances—his equal in all but money, which anybody can have, and no credit to him. Your father was"—she thought he was going to say an "Eton boy," but he spared her—"a true gentleman, my dear, upright and honourable, the sort of man to breed good stock—if you'll excuse the phrase—the sort of blood one needn't be afraid to see in one's children's children. But there, I won't keep you. You are getting ready for your little trip? I wish you a happy Christmas, my dear, and a happy married life, you and him together, and—and—and I hope you'll look on me as your father, my dear——"

Emotion overpowered him, and a second kiss, warmer than the first, concluded the interview. Jenny let him out of the house, and then ran upstairs to tell her anxious sister that Anthony's father transcended the winged seraphs for goodness. And Mr. Churchill returned to Toorak with a swelling breast, to keep a careful silence towards his wife as to what he had been doing. For Maude had declared that nothing should ever induce her to recognise "that person" whom Tony had chosen to pick out of the gutter; and her outraged family abetted her in this resolve.

The yacht sailed on Christmas Eve, with a party of seven in addition to the crew; and Jenny had her first taste of the luxury that was thenceforth to be her portion. She found herself a little queen on board. Mr. Danesbury was introduced to her at the gangway, and rendered a quiet homage that Maude and Lady Louisa, on the previous cruise, had looked for at his hands in vain. Jarvis was there, in the capacity of cabin steward, and was called up to be introduced to her as his future mistress; and Jarvis waited on her as only he could wait, anticipating her little wants and wishes before she had time to form them. He had felt that, in the course of nature, he must have a mistress some day, if he remained in his present service; and, from a first impression that she might have been worse, he gradually adopted his master's view that she could hardly have been better, and treated her accordingly.

"The best servant in the country," Anthony said to her. "And I think we'll take him with us on our travels. You'd find him fifty times more useful than a maid. When we come back and set up housekeeping, he is to be our butler."

Jenny smiled at the prospect.

"How absurd it is!" she ejaculated.

"I don't see it," said Tony.

"I suppose not," she rejoined.

Lest unseasoned persons should have their appetites interfered with, the yacht did not venture outside the Heads, but cruised about in quiet waters, touching now and then at little piers, for the variation of a shore ramble or a picnic in the scrub; and it was a beautiful time. Adam Danesbury and Sarah became great friends. She talked to him by the hour of the virtues of her beloved sister, and he to her of the equal excellencies of Miss Lennox; topics of interest that never palled upon them. Mrs. Liddon was happy, knitting a shawl for Jenny's trousseau, and losing herself in sensational novels, and getting "wrinkles," as she called them, from the very swell cook who daily concocted dishes that she had never so much as heard of. If there was a fly in the sweet ointment of her satisfaction, it lay in the fact that Joey was not taken much notice of. But Mr. Churchill was not interested in Joey, and had invited the friend on purpose to relieve himself of the obligation to take much notice. The young men had each other's company, together with tobacco, books, cards, chess, and Jarvis to bring them cool drinks when they were thirsty; what could junior clerks require more? Joey was a very good boy on this occasion, very subdued and inoffensive, keeping all his swagger until he should return to the office to tell of his doings and the high company he had kept; and he was undeniably a handsome youth, with the proper bearing of a gentleman. But his sex was against him. Crippled Sarah, wizened and sallow, was infinitely more interesting to the distinguished host. Between him and her a very strong bond existed.

And, as he had foreseen, the yachting arrangement was perfect for lovers on whose behalf every other member of the party was minded to be unobtrusive and discreet. What days were those that he and Jenny had together in the first bloom of their courtship! What fresh sea-mornings, in which to feel young blood coursing to the tune of the salt wind and the bubble of the seething wake! What dream-times under the awning in the tempered heat, with soft cushions and poetry books! What rambles on the lonely shores, and rests in ti-tree arbours, and talks and companionship that grew daily fuller and deeper, and more and more intimate and satisfying! In the quiet evenings four people sat down to whist round the lamp in the little cabin, and the fifth dozed over her knitting, so that the remaining two had the deck to themselves, and the romantic hours to revel in undisturbed. Then Tony smoked a little because Jenny wished it, and she leaned on his arm as they paced to and fro; and they opened those sacred chambers of thought which are kept locked in the daytime, and acquainted each other with dim feelings and aspirations that

expressed themselves in sympathetic silences better than in speech.

Thus did they grow together so closely that Jenny's wedding-day came to her with no shock of change or fear. After the Christmas cruise he called to see her at all hours—to disturb her at her flying needlework, which she would slave at, in spite of him—making her own "things" to save expense, as if expense mattered; nightly taking her down to St Kilda for that blow on the pier which still refreshed her more than anything. And very soon they saw the mail boat come in—the very mail boat in which he had taken berths for their wedding journey. As they watched her passing in the falling dusk, they recalled their first meeting in that place—how very few mails had arrived since then, and what stupendous things had happened in the interval!

"What a funk you *were* in!" said Tony, laying his big hand over the small one on his arm. "Poor little mite! You took me for a gay devil walking about seeking whom I might devour, didn't you? What would you have thought if you had known I had followed you all the way—stalked you like a cat after a mouse—eh?"

"You *didn't*, Tony!"

"I did, sweetheart. It was Sarah put me up to it."

"Sarah! I won't believe such a thing of my sister."

"Ask her, then. Sarah understood me a long time before you did. And I made a vow that I'd repay her for that good turn, and I haven't done it yet. What do you think she would like best?"

"I know what she would *like*," said Jenny wistfully. "To go abroad with us. It has been the dream of her life."

"Not this time, pet. Next time she shall. This time I must have only you, and you must have only me. Besides, she wouldn't go, not if you went on your knees to her. She knows better. She's a deal cleverer than you are—in some things."

"I know she is. Poor Sally! And she might have been like me, with everything heart can wish for! Mother says she was a finer baby than I—beautifully formed and healthy; but she had an accident that hurt her back—a fall. And so all the sweetness of life has been taken from her, while I—I am overwhelmed with it."

"Not all," said Tony. "We shall make her happy between us."

"If she can't have *this*," said Jenny, pressing his arm, "she can't know what happiness means."

He drew the warm hand up, and kissed the tips of her fingers, on which gloves were never allowed on these occasions.

"I foresee," he said gravely, "that I shall have to beat you and refuse to give you money for new bonnets, to make you realise that your little feet are standing on the earth, Jenny, and not on the clouds of heaven."

They were married in February, that they might have a quiet month before sailing in March. Mrs. Rogerson wanted to undertake the wedding, but was politely informed that there was to be no wedding; and there was none in her sense. Jenny went out for a walk with her mother and sister, and Anthony went out for a walk with Adam Danesbury; old Mr. Churchill and his daughter Mary, who happened to be staying with him, took a hansom from the office, Joey having been released from his desk therein; and these people met together for a few minutes, transacted their business briefly, and adjourned to the Café Anglais for lunch; after which the bride and bridegroom, being already dressed for travel, with their baggage at the station, fared forth into the wide world.

Thus ended the tea-room enterprise.

And I don't know whether the moral of Jenny's story is bad or good. It depends on the point of view. Virtue, of course, ought to be its own reward—at any rate, it should seek no other; and there are people who think a husband no reward at all, under any circumstances, but quite the contrary. For myself, I regard a rich marriage as rather a vulgar sort of thing, and by no means the proper goal of a good girl's ambitions. Also, however well a marriage may begin, nobody can foretell how it will eventually turn out. It is a matter of a thousand compromises, take it at its best, and all we can say of it is that there is nothing above it in the scale of human satisfactions.

That I will maintain as beyond a doubt, because it is the dictum of nature, who is the mother of all wisdom. She says that even an unlucky marriage, which is a living martyrdom, is better than none, but that a marriage like that which arose out of Jenny's tea-room is a door to the sanctuary of the temple of life, never opened to the undeserving—the nearest approach to happiness that has been discovered at present. Yes—although, without beating her or keeping her short of pocket-money, the husband necessarily makes his wife feel that the earth is her habitation and the clouds of heaven many miles away.

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