ADA CAMBRIDGE

A HUMBLE ENTERPRISE

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A Humble Enterprise

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Содержание

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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 soilable, 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!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.