

A City Schoolgirl



By
May Baldwin

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**A CITY SCHOOLGIRL
AND HER FRIENDS**

BY MAY BALDWIN

**Author of 'Corah's School Chums,' 'Two Schoolgirls of Florence,'
'Sarah's School Friend,' 'The Girls' Eton,' &c.**

WITH SIX COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS

by T. J. Overnell

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She ran off, turning round to wave her hand to her sister.

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A CITY SCHOOLGIRL AND HER FRIENDS.



CHAPTER I.

HARD FACTS.

'These are the facts, Miss Wharton; hard facts no doubt, but you wished for the truth, and indeed I could not have hidden it from you even if I had wished to do so.' So said a keen but kindly faced old gentleman, as he sat in an office surrounded by despatch and deed boxes which proclaimed his profession to be that of a lawyer.

The young lady to whom these remarks were addressed, and who was a pretty girl of twenty-one, dressed in deep and obviously recent mourning, now replied, with a sad smile, 'But I did not want you to hide anything from me; I wanted to hear the truth, Mr. Stacey, and I thank you very much for telling it to me. Then I may understand that we have just fifty pounds a year to live upon between the two of us?'

'That is all, I am sorry to say; at least all that you can count upon with any certainty for the present, for the shares, of which I have been trying to tell you, at present bring in nothing, and may never do so. Of course there is the furniture, which might fetch a hundred or two, for there are two or three valuable pieces; and, besides that, your father had some nice china and some fine old silver,' observed Mr. Stacey.

'Oh I could not sell that!' said the girl hastily, and her colour rose.

The old lawyer shook his head. 'It is not a case of *could*; it is a case of *must*, my dear young lady,' he said not unkindly.

'But why? You say there are no debts to pay. Why, then, should we part with all that is left to us of home?' argued the girl, the tears coming into her eyes.

'Why? Because you must live, you and Vava, and I don't quite see how you are to do that on fifty pounds a year—twenty-five pounds apiece—even if we get your sister into a school where they would take her on half-terms as a kind of pupil-teacher,' explained the lawyer patiently.

'Send Vava to a school as a pupil-teacher, to be looked down upon and despised

by the other girls who were richer than she, to waste half her time in teaching, and let her go away from me? I could not do it!' cried the girl impulsively. Then, as she saw the old man, who had been a lifelong friend of her father's as well as his lawyer, shrug his shoulders, as much as to say she was hopeless, she added more quietly, 'We have never been parted in our lives, Mr. Stacey, and we are sad enough as it is,' and her lips quivered. 'She would be so lonely without me, and I without her; and surely it is as cheap for two to live together as one? Besides, I am going to earn money; I was my father's secretary for three years, and he always said I was a very good one. I can typewrite quite quickly; I have typewritten all his letters for him for the last three years and copied all his manuscripts, and I scarcely ever made a mistake.'

Her listener looked doubtful for a moment; but now that she had some practical suggestion to make, the interview began to take a more business-like appearance, and the old man was ready to listen to her.

'Yes,' he said, 'your father often told me that you were better than any trained secretary he ever had, and I have no doubt your three years' experience has been useful to you; but unfortunately there is no one here who happens to want a secretary'——

Before he could get any further, Stella Wharton interrupted eagerly, 'But we do not think of staying here, and I have thought the whole matter over. I knew I should have to earn my own living, and of course the proper place to do that is in London.'

Mr. Stacey's look of consternation would have been amusing if he had not been so serious. 'You and Vava go and live in London alone! The thing is impossible!'

'Why impossible?' asked Stella quietly. 'Hundreds and thousands of girls do it who are not even as old as I am.'

'Yes, but not girls like you,' said the lawyer. He stopped from sheer inability to express what he meant and felt, which was that such an exceptionally pretty girl as Stella Wharton ought not to start life alone in London and be thrown on her own resources, even though she was a thoroughly trustworthy girl and had a younger sister to live with her. 'You do not know anything about London, or even what a town is like; you have lived in this little Scotch village (for it is not much more), as far as I know, all your life, and the thing would never do. It's—— it's impossible!' he wound up; 'you could not possibly do it!'

'It is not a case of *could*; it is a case of *must*,' quoted Stella, with the ghost of a smile, as she repeated the old man's words of a few minutes ago.

'Yes, yes,' he said; 'you must live, I know that; but even supposing that it would be possible for you to earn your living, and even to earn it as a secretary, you would not be able to earn enough at first to keep yourself, let alone keep your sister as well.'

'We could live on very little,' pleaded Stella; and here she brought out from her purse a slip from a newspaper. 'I thought of answering this.' So saying, she handed it to the old lawyer, who read an advertisement for a secretary in a City office who could typewrite quickly and correctly, and transcribe difficult manuscripts in French and English.

'You might be able to do this,' said the lawyer, 'for, to be sure, you are both excellent French scholars; but a City office'——He looked most disapproving. 'Well,' he said, 'there is no harm in answering it; or suppose you let me answer it for you?'

'I was going to ask you whether you would give me a testimonial; but if you would write for me it would be very, very kind of you,' replied Stella.

'Very well,' said Mr. Stacey with a sigh, 'I shall write to this man; but no doubt he will have hundreds of other applications. The pay is good, and girls who can typewrite are to be found by the thousand nowadays.'

'Yes,' said Stella eagerly; 'but he says "an educated person," and I read in the papers the other day that three-quarters of the girls who go in for typewriting cannot even write their own language, so they probably would not be able to write French.'

'But thirty-five shillings a week! How are you going to live upon thirty-five shillings a week?' inquired the lawyer.

'It will be forty-five shillings a week,' corrected Stella.

'Well, forty-five shillings a week between two of you; that is not a hundred and fifty pounds a year. It would take that for you alone to live in London.'

'I have calculated it all out, Mr. Stacey; and if you would not mind looking at this sheet of paper I think you will see that we could do it;' and Stella handed the lawyer a second piece of paper, upon which, in a very neat and legible hand, the

girl had written out her idea of the probable cost of living for two people in London in lodgings.

'Rent ten pounds a year!' ejaculated the lawyer, reading the first item on the list in a tone of mingled surprise and amusement. 'That shows how much you know of London and its prices. Where do you suppose you would get lodgings for two people at eight shillings per week? Why, a couple of rooms would cost a guinea at least.'

Stella Wharton's expressive face fell as she said, 'I didn't know that. The Misses Burns have a very nice little house here for twenty pounds a year, and I thought lodgings could not possibly be as much, for we would be content with two rooms at first.'

The lawyer read the items through with as grave an air and as attentively as if he were reading an important document dealing with thousands of pounds; and when he had finished he handed it back to her, saying, 'I see, you have thought the matter out carefully, and, at all events, there is no need to settle anything just yet, for you have another month before everything can be settled up here. I shall write to-night in answer to this advertisement.' And then shaking hands very kindly with the girl, the lawyer showed her out.

Stella made her way back to the old Manor House, in which she had lived with her father, mother (who had died some years ago), and her younger sister Vava, ever since she was born, and where a week ago her father had suddenly died, leaving his two daughters, as will have been seen, very inadequately provided for. At the gate, or, more correctly speaking, upon the gate, was Vava, who swung lightly over and into the road to meet her sister.

'Well,' she said, 'what had Mr. Stacey to say?'

'A great deal,' said Stella gravely, as Vava took her arm and hung on to her elder sister.

There were seven years between the two girls, the gap between having been filled by three brothers, who had all died.

'Stella,' said Vava in a coaxing tone, as they turned in at the gate and walked up the long drive, 'you need not be afraid of telling me about it, because I know it all—everything.'

'What do you know?' inquired Stella, smiling in spite of her sadness.

'I know everything that Mr. Stacey said to you,' announced the younger girl confidently.

'How can you possibly know that, Vava, seeing that I have not told you a single word and that you were not at the interview?' Stella was always very matter-of-fact, and Vava would say that she was slow.

'I knew what he was going to say before he ever opened his mouth. He was going to tell you that we had lost all our money, and that this Manor House is not ours any longer, that I must go to a cheap school, and that you must go and be a governess, or something horrid like that,' announced Vava.

'Vava, who told you?' cried Stella, surprised out of her caution, for she had not meant to tell her younger sister the real facts of the case.

'Mrs. Stacey has been here, and she told me that there were some other people coming to the Manor House. When I said we didn't want them, she said the Manor House was not ours, and that we should not be able to keep them out. When I asked her why, she said because we had no money.'

'Mrs. Stacey was quite wrong, and she had no business to speak to you like that. I am sure Mr. Stacey would be very angry if he knew,' said Stella, who looked rather angry herself. 'Besides which,' she added in a calmer tone, 'we have not lost all our money; we have more than a thousand pounds. And you were not quite right about Mr. Stacey either, for he did not suggest that I should go out as a governess, and he is at this minute answering an advertisement for a secretaryship for me.'

Vava was silent for a minute; then she said in a queer little voice, very unlike her usual cheerful one, 'But he did say I was to go to a school, didn't he?'

'Would you dislike that very much?' said Stella, more to try her sister than because she had much doubt of the answer.

'I should hate it, Stella; I would rather scrub floors than be a charity-girl with a red cloak and a round hat and short hair, with perhaps people giving me pennies as I walked along the street.'

'There is no chance of your going to a charity school,' replied Stella, 'there will be enough money to send you to a proper boarding-school, if that is necessary, for there are lots of schools where you do not pay much more than fifty pounds a year; but I should like you to live with me in London, and go to day-school

there.'

'Oh Stella, how lovely! and we could go to the Zoo and Madame Tussaud's and the Tower every day for a walk!' cried Vava with delight.

'I am afraid we could not go daily expeditions, Vava, because I should be in an office all day and you will be at school; but we should have Saturdays and Sundays together, and anything would be better than being parted—wouldn't it?—even if we are poor.'

Vava did not answer, but the squeeze that she gave to Stella's arm was quite answer enough. They had arrived at the door of the Manor House, and the old housekeeper came forward to meet them.

'My dears, come into my little room and have some tea; you must be perished with cold, and I have got some lovely scones that cook has made on purpose for you. Come straight in, won't you, Miss Stella?'

'Thank you, nursie,' said Stella with a pleasant smile, as she followed the housekeeper to her room; while Vava danced along in front of the old woman, calling her all sorts of affectionate names for her thoughtfulness in getting hot scones for them on this cold day.

It was not a usual thing for the girls to have tea with the housekeeper, though they did sometimes do it. But Stella, though surprised at the way the housekeeper asked them, thought it was to save them from having a lonely tea in the dining-room without their father; and to the housekeeper's relief she went straight to the latter's room, and partook very cheerfully of the homely meal set before them. Twice during the meal Stella thought that she heard voices in the passage which she did not recognise as belonging to the servants, who, indeed, were not in the habit of speaking in such loud tones about the house; but she paid no attention to it.

The housekeeper, who had formerly been the girls' nurse, and was still called 'nursie' by them, talked more than usual.

At last Vava observed, 'Nursie, I believe you are feverish.'

'Miss Vava!' exclaimed the old woman, 'what can you be thinking about? What makes you think I am feverish? I am not a bit hot, unless this big fire is making my face a bit red.'

'I am not talking about your face; it is your voice that is feverish, and your eyes are glittering dreadfully,' said Vava.

'Vava,' said Stella, 'do not say such dreadful things'

'Vava,' said Stella, 'do not say such dreadful things.' She also looked at the housekeeper, who did look nervous, if not feverish, as Vava had suggested, and whose face certainly got very flushed as a knock came to the door.

The butler, throwing it open, said to a gentleman and a lady who accompanied him, 'This is the housekeeper's room, sir, and this'——Here he caught sight of Stella and Vava, and with a muttered, 'I beg your pardon, young ladies, I am sure,' he shut the door, and his footsteps were heard hurrying down the passage.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW LAIRD OF LOMORE.

The three occupants of the housekeeper's room took the unexpected visitors in very different and characteristic ways. The housekeeper became what Vava called more 'feverish' than ever; Stella stared in grave surprise at this liberty on the part of the butler; while Vava grew red with anger, and, guessing at once what it meant, cried indignantly, 'How dare they come walking over our house before we are out of it? Stella, why don't you go and tell David he ought to be ashamed of himself letting them in? What is he thinking of to take such a liberty?'

Stella turned her eyes, which justified her name, and looked at her excited younger sister. She had not understood the meaning of the intrusion until her quicker-witted sister told her, and she was not too pleased herself at old David's behaviour, which even she, quiet and attached to the old servant as she was, felt was taking too much upon himself.

But, before she could speak, the old housekeeper broke in, rather nervously, 'Miss Stella, dearie, you must not be angry with David; it's my fault as well as his; we only wanted to save you both worry and annoyance; and so it would, for you would never have known aught about it but for David bringing them in here. He must be daft, after my telling him he was to be sure and keep them out of your sight.'

'But I don't understand. I suppose these are the people who want to take the house, and, if so, of course they wish to see it? Still, I think they should have written just to ask my leave; and, at any rate, David should have done so before he showed them over our house,' Stella answered with dignity.

'That's just it; you don't understand, my bairn; and I don't rightly understand it myself. It's their house—something about a mortgage—now the poor Laird's gone, and they only waited until he was under the ground to come tearing up from London in their motor to look at their property, and it was more than David could do to put them off, and so, sooner than have you troubled by their impudence'——said the housekeeper.

'It is not very considerate, perhaps, but they have a right to ask to see their own house without being called impudent; and though you mean it kindly, nursie, you and David, I think I should know what is going on in this house,' interrupted Stella.

'We'd just better get out of it as soon as we can. Mrs. Stacey came to ask us to go and stay with them; she told me to give you the invitation. But I'd rather go to the manse; Mrs. Monro would be sure to take us!' cried Vava.

However, before Vava had uttered the last word, another knock came at the door, and in answer to Stella's 'Come in!' David M'Taggart entered, looking rather shamefaced. In broad Scotch, which it will perhaps be best to spare English readers, he said, 'I'm sorry to trouble you, Miss Stella, but the leddy will not take no for an answer; she wants to see you.'

Stella unconsciously put on her most dignified air, and said, 'I do not understand why she should wish to see me. It is the house they have bought, not us; and if she wishes to know when it will be at her disposal, you may tell her we will be out of it'—she hesitated a moment, and her voice trembled as she added, 'as soon as we can move the furniture; in a week, if possible.'

Still David lingered. 'It's just that—the furniture, I mean—that she'll be after, I'm thinking. I know it's hard on you, missie. But you must just be brave and the Laird's daughter; and, if you could make up your mind to it, just see the leddy and her husband; they're no' bad, though they're no' the quality.'

David M'Taggart had nursed Stella in his arms as a baby, and had been the old Laird's right hand. In fact, when Mr. Wharton was deep in his literary labours, David had kept things about the place straighter than they would otherwise have been; and if his education had been better, and he had been allowed, he would probably have managed the money matters of his late master, and prevented the Laird allowing them to get into the disastrous state they were found to be in after his death, of which state the late Laird was, happily for him, though unfortunately for his daughters, quite ignorant.

Stella listened to David's advice, and replied, 'Very well, David, I will see this lady. What is her name?'

'It's a fine name—Mrs. Montague Jones she calls herself; but it's with him I'd do business, if I may be so bold as to say so, for he's a fair man, and not so keen on a bargain as she.'

To this piece of advice the girl made no reply, but followed the old butler out of the room and down the wide staircase to the drawing-room. At the door she paused involuntarily, as David threw it open for her and announced, 'This is Miss Wharton, mem.'

The short, thick-set business man, who was standing looking out of one of the windows, turned sharply round at the words; and, as he told his wife afterwards, was 'fairly taken aback to see that beautiful young lady standing there like a princess in the doorway and looking down upon us.'

And his wife—a handsome woman herself, who was sitting at a table examining some old silver, of which the Laird had a fine collection—though she answered him rather sharply to the effect that the 'looking down' ought to be on their side rather than the Whartons', was conscious somehow of a feeling of inferiority. However, she rose, and, coming forward, said civilly and kindly enough, 'I must apologise, Miss Wharton, for this intrusion, and it's only because I think we may be able to be of use to you'—Here Mrs. Montague Jones stopped abruptly, for Stella's pride had risen, and she stiffened visibly.

'My wife doesn't mean that, Miss Wharton. What we wished to ask was a favour to us, for which we would willingly make a return. I'm a business man, and you are a young lady who knows nothing about business,' Mr. Montague Jones now put in.

But Stella did not look any better pleased as she answered civilly but distantly, 'In that case would it not be better to address yourself to our lawyer, who is a man of business?' Stella had been her father's secretary for so long that she spoke in a slightly stilted English with a Scotch accent.

'Quite right, and so we did, but he told us he could do nothing without you'—Mr. Stacey had said that he could do nothing *with* her on this particular matter—'and we have taken the liberty of coming straight to the fountain-head, so to speak. It's about this furniture now.'

But Stella interrupted hastily, 'I am afraid you have given yourself unnecessary trouble'—and her looks said 'and me too'—'for I have no intention of parting with it.'

A gleam came into the man's eye, whether of anger at her haughtiness or admiration at the spirit which could refuse a possibly advantageous business offer was not clear, with poverty staring her in the face; but he laid a hand on his

wife's arm to prevent her speaking, and continued quietly, and in a kind and friendly tone, 'No one has asked you to do that, Miss Wharton. I feel with you that however valuable furniture or silver or that kind of thing may be, it is doubly valuable to the owner, especially when, as in your case, it has been in the family for a long time, and I should be the last to counsel you to part with it.'

Miss Wharton looked surprised, and so did Mrs. Jones, who stared at her husband in amazement.

'In that case, I fail to see'——began the girl, and then hesitated.

'You fail to see what proposal I have to make about the furniture? If you'll have a little patience I'll tell you. I've just seen your lawyer, and a very nice man he is, and has your interests at heart, for which you may be thankful, as they are not all so. I hear you are thinking of going to London. Now, you can't take all this fine furniture with you; it would get knocked to pieces on the way there, besides costing no end of money, and you'd want a mansion to put it in when you got there, which you won't have just yet, though you will have again one day, I hope. Now what, may I ask, do you mean to do with it?'

'I don't know. I shall warehouse it here, I suppose,' said Stella, who had no clear ideas on the subject.

'That's just what I was going to suggest. Why not leave it all here, with the exception of any little things or specially valuable belongings that you 'd like to put away, and let us pay a fair sum for the use of them. They'll not spoil, for they are old and well-made, and there'll only be the wife and me and Jamie, that's our son and heir——ahem! a quiet, well-behaved young fellow——and none of us will knock it about; besides, your man M'Taggart has agreed——condescended I might say——to stay on with us for the present, and he'll be free to write and tell you if it's being badly used; and we'll put a clause in the agreement that if M'Taggart thinks it is in bad hands you have the right to order its removal in twenty-four hours,' announced Mr. Jones.

'Really, Monty'——cried his wife; but her husband pressed her arm, and patiently waited for Stella's reply.

The girl puckered her brows; it would be a way out of the difficulty. But she did not feel equal to settling the matter herself, and answered doubtfully, 'If Mr. Stacey approves, I should have no objection——that is to say, I would agree; but I should like some of my mother's things put away.'

'Oh of course, we quite understand that, Miss Wharton, and we will have everything put down in black and white by your lawyer,' said Mr. Montague Jones.

Stella, who had taken the seat offered her by her undesired visitor, now rose to put an end to the interview; and then a sudden thought struck her. These people had motored from the south, and perhaps had come far that day—at any rate from the nearest town, a good many miles off—and she had not even offered them a cup of tea, and her Scotch hospitality forbade her to let them depart without doing so much. She accordingly offered it, and Mrs. Jones accepted the offer so gladly that her young hostess felt ashamed of herself; and, ringing the bell, she ordered in tea.

The interval of waiting might have been rather awkward; but not long after David had answered the summons the door opened, and in walked Vava.

Mr. and Mrs. Jones had an idea that Scotch girls in general were plain and hard-featured, hence their surprise at Stella's appearance; and Vava, though she was at an awkward age, and had not Stella's beauty, was a bright, fresh-looking girl, with merry, laughing eyes which no trouble could dim for long, and she too fitted in with her surroundings.

'How do you do? David will bring the tea in a minute, and there are still some scones left,' she announced, without waiting to be introduced.

Mr. Jones shook her hand heartily. 'That's good hearing; we lunched early, and I've been with lawyers ever since, and worried with business, about which you luckily know nothing; and scones—which we poor ignorant Londoners call "scoones"—sounds very inviting.'

'So they are, deliciously inviting; but as for your business, I just do know something about it,' Vava observed.

'Vava!' cried Stella horrified.

Mr. Jones laughed, not in the least embarrassed, though he had not meant to be taken up so. 'Ah well, business is business and pleasure is pleasure, and I don't believe in mixing them, though some people do. Business is over for this afternoon, and now I am having the pleasure of making your acquaintance.'

'Do you go to school, Miss Wharton?' inquired his wife, putting the first question ladies seem invariably to put to girls in their teens.

'No, but I am going to a day-school when we get to London. Do you know any nice ones there, not too dear?' inquired Vava.

Stella coloured hotly, and looked despairingly at Vava, who was evidently in a mood to say dreadful things, as Stella considered them.

But Mr. Jones stepped into the breach. 'If you take my advice you'll go to my school; it's one of the best in London.'

'Do you keep a school? I didn't know rich people did that,' said Vava.

'I don't keep it exactly, but I am chairman of the governors, and on speech-days I go there, dressed in my chain and brass breastplate and things, and listen to how all the girls have been getting on, and I frown at the idle ones, and praise the good ones, and if you were to come there I should praise and clap you. It's a first-class school though the fees are very low,' he wound up, as if this were an important detail.

'Nothing is decided yet,' said Stella, rather shortly, and frowning at the too candid Vava.

'No, and of course there is no hurry; and, if you will excuse my talking of business, I should like just to say that if you wished to stay here a month or more we should be delighted. As for that school, it is a famous City foundation, and I will send you the prospectus when I return home, if you will allow me,' said Mrs. Jones, whom tea and scones had made quite friendly.

'A City school!' said Vava. 'Is that a charity school?'

'Oh dear no!' cried Mrs. Jones hastily. 'My niece used to go there.'

Stella gave a ghost of a smile, but said nothing; and soon her visitors left, with profuse thanks and promises to see the lawyer and let him arrange matters.

It was consequently with lightened hearts that the two orphans stood looking after their visitors in the darkening day.



CHAPTER III.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

'They are not quite ladies and gentlemen—I mean, a lady and gentleman—but they are rather kind, and I think they will take care of our furniture, Stella; so I should let them have it till we are rich again and can buy this place back from them,' said Vava, as she stood on the steps watching the tail-light of the Montague Joneses' well-appointed car disappear down the drive.

'How do you know anything about that?' inquired her sister in surprise; for unless her sister had been listening at the door, a meanness of which she knew her to be incapable, she could not imagine how she could guess what the new owners of Lomore had been proposing.

'Ah, ha! a little bird told me. But I quite approve; it will save us the trouble of moving it about, and you'll see we shall be back here again before long; that's another thing a little bird told me,' cried Vava, loosing her sister's arm to hop on one foot down the stone steps, and then try to perform the same feat up them.

'Vava! do be sensible at your age, and tell me what you mean by your nonsense about a little bird telling you a private conversation which no one could honourably know anything about,' said her sister severely.

Vava was sobered for the minute; and, giving a last hop on to the top step, she stood on her two feet before her sister and retorted, 'What do you mean by your insinuations, pray? Do you imagine I have been listening through the keyhole? because, if so, I decline to parley with you further. And as for my age, why shouldn't I do gymnastics? When I go to an English school I shall have to do far sillier things than that. And, oh Stella! do you think I shall go to that City school? I don't think I should like to be taught by Mr. Montague Jones, though he is a kind old man.'

'Mr. Montague Jones does not teach there; he told you that, and I don't know at all where you will go to school. Perhaps it will be a boarding-school after all, for we cannot live in London unless I get this post as secretary, or some other like it; and you would perhaps be best away from me, for you do not obey me,' replied her elder sister.

'If you mean that you want to know how I knew about the Joneses and their offering to take care of our furniture, David told me; and if you want to know how he knew—which I can see you do, because you have screwed your eyebrows into a question-mark—Mr. Jones told him himself, when David said he knew we would never sell it—for it is half mine, isn't it, although you are my guardian?—and it's to look after it and the place for us till we get it back that David is staying with them, though "they are not the quality," as he says.'

This explanation satisfied Miss Wharton, and she only said, in answer to Vava's last remark, 'Yes, the furniture is half yours, of course, and I should have told you about this offer, as I am legally responsible for it and all your property. And talking of property, Vava, it is very hard I know, but this place is no longer ours, nor can it ever be again, for we have no rich relations to leave us enough money to buy it back; nor shall we ever have enough ourselves even if the Joneses wanted to sell it, which I don't fancy they will, for they have bought it for their son and heir, as they called him to me.'

'How hateful! a Londoner Laird of Lomore! Oh but he sha'n't be that long, for I am going to earn a fortune and turn him out!' cried Vava, her eyes flashing.

Stella laughed at her younger sister's vehemence, and inquired, 'In what way are you going to earn money, pray?'

'I'm going to invent something. I read the other day in that ladies' magazine of a man who invented a very simple little thing to save candles, and he made thousands and thousands of pounds by it; and I've got an idea too—it's a thing to save matches,' announced Vava.

'Matches! Why should one save matches? They are cheap enough without saving them,' exclaimed Stella.

'Not in every country. Don't you remember Mrs. M'Ewan saying that when they were abroad last year they paid a penny a box, and for such bad ones too? Well, my idea is to make them light at both ends; you always throw away half the match, and now it will do for twice,' explained Vava.

Stella did not laugh for fear of hurting Vava's feelings and arousing her wrath, but only said, 'You do think of odd things, Vava; but I wish you would not say all you think. I am often quite nervous of what you may say or do next.'

'You needn't be nervous now, because I am going to be quite grown-up and

proper, and not give you any more trouble,' announced Vava, who meant what she said, though she did not always act up to her excellent resolutions, as will be seen.

In fact, only two days later she made her sister nervous, besides annoying her; for, as the elder girl was walking towards the village to Mr. Stacey's office, in answer to a message from him requesting her to call, she saw her sister, whom she had missed for the last hour, sitting beside Mr. Montague Jones in his motor, being whirled past her at a terrible speed, or at least so it seemed to her. Whether Vava saw her or not Stella could not be sure; but she took no notice of her, neither did Mr. Jones, whom she supposed did not recognise her. Rather ruffled at the occurrence, Miss Wharton continued her way to the lawyer's, her pretty head held still more erect, and a slightly scornful smile on her face at the way her sister's indignation against the London Laird had evaporated.

'Well, Miss Wharton, my dear, I have good news for you—at least, I suppose I must call it good news, though it means that we shall lose you, for the people whose advertisement I answered have written offering you the post of secretary to the junior partner of a very good firm in the City of London—Baines, Jones & Co. Your hours will be ten till four, short hours for London clerks—er, secretaries I mean; and your work will be to translate French letters for him and write French answers, which he will dictate in English. You see it is a position of trust, because they don't know much French and have to trust to your translating their letters faithfully, and that I was able to assure them you would do. In fact, after what I said they were quite ready to take you, and it is the best I can do for you—not what I should like for your father's daughter, but it might be worse. You will have a nice little room to yourself with your typewriter, and need have nothing to do with any one, and I may tell you that if you give satisfaction your salary will be raised.'

'Thank you very much, Mr. Stacey,' replied Stella briefly. She was grateful, and the old man knew it; but the vision his words brought up of her future life in a stuffy, dingy City office, sitting at a typewriter writing dull business letters—a very different thing from the literary work she had helped her father with—depressed her for a moment. Then she roused herself, and went on to speak of the arrangement which had been agreed upon between the lawyer and Mr. Montague Jones about the furniture, and which only needed her signature to be settled.

'Ah, yes, they have been most generous,' began the lawyer; but he hastened to

correct himself when he saw Stella's face stiffen—'fair, I should say, and anxious to meet your wishes. I think we are fortunate in falling into their hands, and may safely trust them.' How fortunate, Mr. Stacey did not dare to say.

'Yes, I think they will take care of our furniture, and they evidently wish to be friendly, which is more than I do, though Vava seems to have taken to them,' replied Stella.

'And they to her. Here is the prospectus of that school Mr. Montague Jones is governor of. He is evidently a little afraid of you and your stately airs'—here the lawyer's eyes twinkled—'not that he thinks the less of you for them, quite the contrary. However, to resume, it seems an excellent school; the teaching staff is first-rate, the building palatial, and the fees most moderate—two guineas a term. Moreover, as it is in the City, not far from your own office, you could go there and back together, which would be a great thing,' explained the lawyer.

He was a busy man, for not only every one in the sleepy little town, but all round, great and small, came to him for advice, and Stella, knowing this, was grateful for his interest in her affairs; and on his advice agreed, if it proved to come up to the prospectus, to send Vava to the City school. This business being settled, she turned homeward with a feeling that now she had no more to do with Lomore, and that the sooner they left it and began their new life in London the better. In fact, this was practically what Mr. Stacey said: Messrs Baines, Jones & Co. would like her to begin at her earliest convenience, and the new term began next Tuesday, and this was Wednesday.

Vava was on the gate when her sister arrived. 'Where have you been? I've been such a lovely drive with the Montagues—well, never mind their other name; it's horribly common anyway. I met them up the road, and they asked if we would come for a run, and we came back to fetch you; but you had gone to Mr. Stacey's, so I was sure you would not mind; and—what do you think?—they are going to drive us up to London in their car!' the girl cried, pouring out the words so fast that her sister could hardly follow her.

'Drive us to London? Indeed, they are going to do no such thing! I do not care to accept favours from strangers; and really, Vava, I don't know what you mean by knowing my affairs before I know them myself. I don't know when we are going to London yet. Perhaps not for a week or two, and at any rate not with those people, who may be very kind, but are not educated; he can't even speak the King's English. No, if we can't make friends in our own class we will go

without.'

Vava looked down at her sister, who stood with one hand on the gate, looking so stiff and proud that her face, which was really a sweet one, was almost forbidding. 'All right,' she said, swinging her feet to and fro in a way that made Stella quite nervous—'all right, then; we'll go in a stuffy railway-carriage, and have to sit up all night, and I shall be sick, as I was when we went to Edinburgh; but you won't care as long as you can stick your head up and look down on people who try to be friendly and nice to you, just because he says "dy" instead of "day;" and what does it matter? We pronounce some words quite wrong, according to the English, and I dare say they'll laugh at us when we go south. Mrs. M'Ewan said the waiter at the hotel couldn't understand her when she asked for water.'

Mrs. M'Ewan was a neighbouring laird's wife, and spoke very broad Scotch.

Stella made no answer to this tirade of her younger sister's, who swung herself off the gate and walked back to the house with Stella in no good-humour.

There they found a note from Mrs. Jones, which, to Stella's surprise, was quite grammatically written, asking whether they would honour them by occupying two seats in their car when they went back to town. 'My husband is so taken by your sister, and hearing that the train made her sick, he ventured to suggest your coming with us. He begs me to say that he feels under such obligations to you for lending us your beautiful old furniture and plate—which no money could repay or replace—that he would be glad if you would accept this attention as a mark of our gratitude.'

'That will fetch the proud hussy, if anything will. Poor girls, I am very sorry for them, especially the elder, for she'll have a lot of humble pie to eat before she's done,' Mr. Montague Jones had said to his wife; but this remark, needless to say, she did not mention in the letter. She only added that they were not particular which day they returned to town, but would go any day that suited Miss Wharton.

Mr. Jones may not have been an educated man—in fact, he would have been the first to acknowledge it; but he certainly was a tactful man, and understood managing people, as indeed he well might, for he had managed a large place of business for many years, and done so successfully, as his wealth testified.

So, after reading the letter over slowly, Stella turned to her sister with a half-

ashamed smile and said, 'If you like we will go with the Montague Joneses; but only on one condition, and that is that you promise not to get too intimate, or to ask me to be friendly with them in town. They may not want to know us, for we shall be very poor; but I won't be patronised by any one, and I don't want them to call.'

Vava looked as if she were going to say something, but thought better of it, and gave the desired promise.



CHAPTER IV.

UPS AND DOWNS.

There was nothing now to keep them at Lomore. Mr. Stacey's clerks had made an inventory of the contents of the house; David M'Taggart and Mrs. Morrison had packed their 'young leddies' personal belongings, part in boxes to be taken to London, and part locked away in a room in the old home, of which David M'Taggart had the key, and into which, he solemnly assured his late young mistresses, no one should enter but himself.

So all that remained for the two orphans to do was to say good-bye to their friends, which they hurried over as much as possible, for partings are painful in any case, and it was especially so in this one, and the most painful was the parting from 'nursie,' as they called Mrs. Morrison.

'And remember, my bairns, if you are ill or want me at any time, I'm here and ready to come to you. I've a good bit laid by for a rainy day, and I've no need to work any more, thank the Lord, and don't mean to work for any but a Wharton, if he was as rich as Dives; so if ever you should want a maid who needs no wages I'll be waiting for the call, and will be with you as fast as the train will take me, for you're like my own bairns,' said the loyal old servant, who had spent forty of her fifty-five years of life in the service of the Laird of Lomore, as had her father and grandfather before her, and was still as hale and hearty as a woman of thirty.

The two girls clung to her, but could not say a word, and Mr. Montague Jones, who had brought the car to the house to fetch them, turned his head away and cleared his throat suspiciously, feeling, as he told his wife afterwards, like a veritable robber who had stolen their home, and turned these two helpless and innocent girls adrift in the wide world, of which they knew nothing.

Mrs. Montague Jones did her best to be pleasant to her companion, who was Stella, for Vava was sitting beside Mr. Jones and the chauffeur; but though the girl was perfectly civil, and expressed her gratitude for their kindness, Stella was so reserved and unresponsive that it is to be feared that Mrs. Jones did not enjoy her return trip as much as she had done the one northward to take possession of

the coveted property, which foolish speculations had caused the late Laird to mortgage up to its full value.

Poor proud Stella, in her innocence it had not occurred to her that she would be entertained at the best hotels on the way south; nor did she know that the journey was being made very leisurely, and, to tell the truth, by rather indirect routes, so that their thoughts might be distracted, and that they might be shown pretty scenery and interesting cathedrals and old towns. But there was no getting out of it now.

'Though if I had had any idea of the obligation we were putting ourselves under I would never have come, not even to prevent your being train-sick, Vava,' she declared to her sister.

'Then it's a very good thing you did not know; we're having a glorious time, and what is a few pounds to them? Nothing, as Mr. Montague Jones says; he is enjoying these sights twice as much for seeing us enjoy them; though, for that matter, you don't look much as if you were enjoying yourself, except when we are going over cathedrals, or looking at some extra-special view, and then, though I say it as shouldn't, your face is worth looking at,' affirmed Vava.

Stella laughed at the candid flattery, and took a hint from the equally candid criticism, and tried to be more agreeable to her kind hostess, with the result that Mrs. Montague Jones was emboldened to ask her if she would not stay a few days with them in Belgrave Square until they had found rooms.

But Stella withdrew into her shell at once. 'Oh no, thank you; you are very kind, but we have the address of some lodgings which Mrs. Monro, our minister's wife, knows, and they are expecting us.'

They were now at their last stage, and Stella handed Mrs. Monro's card to Mr. Jones, and on it was written the address. He took it and read it, and said, 'Vincent Street, Westminster; that's not far from us. We shall hope to see you sometimes; it's a poky little street, and you'll be glad to get out of it, though even Belgrave Square will seem sooty and confined after Lomore.'

It was not as tactful a speech as it might have been, and was received in such freezing silence by Stella that his wife did not dare to second the invitation, and the two girls were deposited at their new abode without any promise of meeting again, as far as Stella was concerned. As for Vava, she shook hands with Mr. Jones very warmly, and kissed Mrs. Jones; but neither did she say anything but

good-bye, which, truth to say, she said in such a cheerful tone as to surprise her sister.

But the cheeriness soon subsided at sight of their rooms, for which the landlady, impressed by the grandeur of their arrival, hastened to apologise. 'And where all that luggage that arrived yesterday is to go I don't know; I've no place for it here, miss; so I just told the railway-man to keep all but these two port-manteaus at their storerooms,' she added.

'Perhaps that was best,' said Stella quietly. And then, the woman having taken her departure, she sat down on the bed, a large double one, which filled up half the dingy room, and looked round the apartment and into the tiny sitting-room with distaste.

'It's horrid, and—one thing's certain, I won't have that man staring at me!' cried Vava impulsively, jumping up, and mounting on a chair in order to take down a large portrait of a stolid-faced policeman.

'Vava, come down and leave it alone! What can you be thinking of? That is the landlady's husband, no doubt. Mrs. Monro said he was a policeman, and so we should be safe with him. You will hurt her feelings!' cried Stella.

'Then let her have him in her own bedroom. How can I sleep with him looking as if he were going to take me to prison all the time?' said Vava. However, she did not take 'him' down, but came down herself; and as the Joneses had thoughtfully had a substantial tea before they deposited their passengers, the girls decided that they would want nothing that night but a glass of milk, and went out in the dusk to see what they could of London, and get out of their close and confined lodgings.

'It went to my heart, Monty, to leave those two poor girls in that dreadful place. This world's very unfair somehow,' said Mrs. Jones, as she and her husband entered their own handsome house.

'And yet you were not too pleased at my offer about the furniture, and wanted to make me force them to sell it outright,' her husband reminded her.

'Oh well, business is business; but now that I know those two Misses Wharton I feel glad the furniture is still theirs, though what good it'll do them now or ever—unless some duke comes along and marries Miss Stella for her pretty face—I don't know.'

'The money I pay for hire will do them good'—Mr. Jones was paying fifty pounds a year—and it needn't be a duke. I'd not mind her for a daughter myself.'

'Pray don't put such ideas into Jamie's head; not that she would not be a good wife, for she's a good girl, but she'd never look at a Jones. And if that's your plan, I'm sorry she ever came to town, for it will only upset Jamie. I do hope he won't fall in love with her!' cried Jamie's mother in alarm.

'Who spoke of Jamie? The girl's up here to earn her living, and has no idea of love-making, thank goodness! As for Jamie, he's all right, and can look after himself at his age, I should hope. I only meant that I'd like as ornamental a wife for him when he reigns up there as I've got to face me,' said Mr. Montague Jones gallantly. Then in the bustle of home-coming and the joy of meeting the aforementioned Jamie, the Whartons were banished as subjects of conversation, although a little later their name cropped up in connection with their property and other matters.

The Whartons themselves never mentioned their late hosts. London in the dusk, with its brilliant lights, its roar of traffic, and its hurrying crowds, claimed their attention.

'Oh Stella, it's awful—just awful!' cried Vava, clinging to her sister's arm in alarm.

'See, there is a park in front of us; let us go in there; it will be quieter,' replied Stella, as she pressed Vava's arm and hurried her over the crossing into Hyde Park, in which direction they had fortunately strayed.

Vava drew a great breath of relief as they began to cross the park diagonally. 'Thank goodness! I can breathe here, and needn't be looking all the time to see where those horrid, screechy motors are coming to, tearing along as they do,' she said, quite forgetful of the fact that she herself had not many hours before been tearing along in one of these same 'horrid motors.'

It was January, and the air was cold, but the Highland girls did not mind that, and took such a long walk, turning and twisting in the park, so as to avoid the streets, that they were tired out when they reached their lodgings. They slept soundly, and the next morning awoke with more courage to face their new life. The first thing was to visit the City school, and this they did together.

'I have heard of you, Miss Wharton,' said Miss Upjohn, the head-mistress, 'and I

hope I shall be able to persuade you to entrust your sister to us.' She then proceeded to give her visitor a detailed account of the school, its staff, and its aims. 'Our term begins to-morrow, and that,' she continued, pointing to a large card on the table, 'is our motto for the week. We have a new one each week, and this week, as it is the beginning of the new year, we have taken "Truth and honour." The school motto is "Love as brethren," and I shall make a little speech upon it to-morrow morning after prayers.'

Stella listened in her dignified, reserved way, and it was only when she smiled that the head-mistress understood Mr. Montague Jones's enthusiastic way of speaking of her.

Vava was more responsive. 'Oh Stella, this is a lovely school! Do let me come here. And for our gymnastics we wear a red drill-dress—what fun! And what nice big rooms! I can breathe here!' she cried.

Stella smiled again. 'I don't know what to say; it seems so funny to take the first school one sees without looking about; but we have no time to spare. The only thing I am afraid of is, if you will excuse my saying so, the companions she will find here; it is not a very aristocratic part of London, and I should not like Vava to mix with the children I see in this street.'

Miss Upjohn smiled too. 'I understand your feelings; but I can assure you that though there is a mixture here, as in all big schools—even the best—our girls do not come from the streets; they come from very good neighbourhoods. I do not think your sister will come to any harm by mixing with them, and I will myself take special care of her and let her sit at lunch with one of our teachers, who dine here in the middle of the day.'

Miss Wharton did not know that she owed this concession to Mr. Jones's representations; she did not even know that it was a concession, for she had been used to a good deal of attention both from her position and her beauty; but she knew that Miss Upjohn was being very kind and friendly, and she felt sure her sister would be safe with such a high-principled woman. So before they left the big, ugly red-brick building, which Mr. Jones had truly called palatial, it was decided that Vava should go there the next day and be duly enrolled as a day-scholar at the City School for Girls.

'And now that all that is comfortably settled, let us go and see the Tower; it is in the City, so it must be near,' observed Vava.

But she was mistaken; it was not near. However, as they were walking along—for they were too unused to cities to think it necessary to go everywhere in buses and trams—Stella gave a little exclamation of surprise.

'What is it, Stella? What frightened you?' inquired Vava, looking up at her sister.

'I am not frightened, only surprised. There is the office that I shall go to every day, quite close to your school, so that I can see you to your door before I go there. I am so glad,' explained Stella.

'So am I glad, Stella. Now I sha'n't feel lonely, for I don't mind telling you that I felt just a wee bit frightened at the thought of being away from you among strangers, and no one I knew anywhere near; and here you will be quite near me, so that I can run in and see you whenever I want!' exclaimed the girl.

'Oh but you must not do that; you must not run about the streets alone! London is not Lomore, you know; besides, you will have no time to pay visits in school-hours, nor shall I have time to receive them. You must remember I am only a paid servant to these people,' said Stella, with proud humility. She then continued, 'I cannot receive visitors as if it were my own house, though, of course, if anything were really the matter Miss Upjohn could send for me. It is nice for us both to know we are only a few minutes' walk from each other.'

Not for many a day did Stella and Vava Wharton know to whose kind interest they owed this fact, nor to whom they were indebted for many a privilege, both in the former's office and the latter's school; though it was to one and the same person. At any rate, this knowledge of their nearness to each other made their first day in London a happier one than it would otherwise have been.

The Tower proved as fascinating as it always does to girls who love history when they see the fortress for the first time, and the sisters spent a long time in it and its surroundings, and went back to Vincent Street resigned to, if not content with, their lot, the worst part of which was their lodgings. Stella felt that the house could never be in the least a home to them, and was not situated in a nice part for them to live in, though she did not see what she could do better, with their limited means and knowledge of London.



CHAPTER V.

THE NEW LIFE.

'But, Stella, you have not to be at your office till ten o'clock! What will you do with yourself for this half-hour?' asked Vava next morning as her sister left her at the gates of the City School for Girls five minutes before school opened, which was half-past nine.

The two sisters had walked together to the City along the Embankment. To girls used to tramping miles over the moors, the walk was nothing, though they found that the pavements tired their feet.

'I shall take a walk, or go into a shop and have a bun,' replied Stella, for on second thoughts she shunned a walk alone through these streets crowded with men, who looked curiously, though not disrespectfully, at the tall, slight, beautiful girl, who walked with a leisurely, unbusiness-like air through the City.

'Yes, go and have a bun, and I will come to the office at half-past three and wait for you in the sitting-room,' said Vava, who felt for her sister being stared at so.

'I don't think there will be much of a sitting-room to wait in, Vava; but when you come to fetch me, just take one of your lesson-books and read quietly until I come down; and, remember, don't talk to any one,' Stella admonished her sister.

Vava looked astonished and as if she were going to argue the question; but the school-bell rang at that moment, and she ran off, turning round to wave her hand to her sister, who stood watching her until she joined a group of girls, with whom she seemed to be conversing in a most friendly way, and not in the least as if it were the first time in her life that she had ever seen them.

With a sigh, Stella turned away; she could not be like that, she could not help being stiff and reserved. Vava was quite different, and her elder sister found herself hoping fearfully that she would not get too intimate with these 'City girls.' However, she consoled herself with the thought that it could only be in school-hours, and that even in the dinner interval she would be with the young teacher who was to take special care of her, and who, at all events, would be an educated woman.

And then, as she felt somehow that her sauntering walk attracted too much attention, she turned into a baker's shop, and, addressing the pleasant-faced woman behind the counter, said, 'May I have a bun, please, and rest here for half-an-hour until my office opens?'

'Indeed you may, miss, and if you like to step into my parlour you'll find a fire there; it's no weather to be walking about the streets, and none too pleasant for a young lady like you, not but what I say if you show respect to yourself others will show it to you; still, my parlour's the best place on a day like this,' said the baker's wife; for it was a cold, frosty January day.

Stella thanked her kindly Samaritan, who little knew how nervous and miserable her self-contained and dignified visitor felt as she sat there, nor how reluctantly she rose to go to Baines, Jones & Co.'s office.

The junior partner of the firm was not often so punctual at his office as he was on this morning, on which ten o'clock found him sitting in his private room, much to the perturbation of the clerks, who hurried in at or just after the hour of ten.

'There's a lady to see you, sir,' said a young clerk, handing him a card.

'Oh—er, yes; show her into this room,' said the junior partner, with an embarrassment which amazed the clerk, who forthwith went and informed his fellow-clerks that the young boss's best girl had called upon him, and 'he doesn't seem too pleased, though she's handsome enough in all conscience—a regular beauty, and no mistake, and a cut above him too; though what she means by running after him to the City goodness knows!'

'There's no knowing what girls will do nowadays,' said a wise youth of sixteen, who was promptly told to shut up.

But Stella, quite unconscious of these criticisms on her conduct, walked quietly into the junior partner's room, and, bowing gravely, said, 'I am Miss Wharton;' and waited for him to speak.

The junior partner rose from his seat and put a chair for her. 'I am very glad to see you, Miss Wharton. I hope you had a pleasant run—journey south?'

Stella might almost have been carved in stone as she answered, 'Yes, thank you. Will you kindly tell me my duties?'

If her employer felt snubbed he did not show it, but told her what he wanted her to do, and then showed her the room in which she was to work, which was through the clerks' room. Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him. 'There is another door to this room, and by it you could come along the corridor to me when necessary without coming through the clerks' office; and that is the housekeeper's room opposite. She will make you tea, and give you hot water or anything you want,' he said, opening a door on to the corridor.

Stella gravely bowed her thanks. She was grateful for the thought, and she found her new employer very quiet and civil. When the morning was over, and she took him his letters, which he was thankful to find correctly done, he showed his kindness further by saying, 'There is a ladies' club near here where lady-clerks can go and lunch very reasonably and comfortably; the housekeeper will show you the way, if you like. You will find it convenient to stay there till two o'clock; the City is a dull place for young ladies.'

Stella thanked him again, and took his advice; but when she had left the room the junior partner got up, stretched his long limbs, for he was a tall, athletic man, who looked more as if he should have been on a yacht than in a City office. 'Whew! what an iceberg! And to think that that imperial beauty is my clerk, and that I have to give her orders from ten to four, and be repressed and snubbed by her! As if I wanted to take a liberty! Why, I dare not even mention the weather! Well, so be it; she's a good typist, and has a good business head for all it's so pretty.—Well, Mrs. Ryan, what is it? Come in. Did you take Miss Wharton to the Enterprise Club—isn't that its name?'

'Yes, sir, I did, and right glad she was to be in such a place, so bright and comfortable, poor, sweet young lady. But I came to ask you, sir, couldn't she begin at half-past nine and stop at half-past three?' inquired the kind-hearted Irishwoman, explaining about Vava and her hours.

'H'm, it would suit her better, no doubt; but I don't know about me. Oh yes, I could leave her work to do. By all means. Thanks for telling me; I'll arrange it,' said the junior partner kindly, and added, 'And take the little sister into your room if we have not quite finished, Mrs. Ryan; the waiting-room is no place for her, if she is anything like her sister.'

'The City's no place for either of them, Mr. James; but they could not have found a better master than you, go where they might,' said the good woman.

Mr. James laughed; but he did not like to hear himself spoken of as Stella's

master, and thought with a grim smile how angry she would have been if she had heard the expression.

The clerks meanwhile had a subject for conversation which kept their tongues wagging in an undertone, to the neglect of their work.

'The new lady-clerk! Who would have believed it? And she gave me her card for all the world like a duchess.' Here there was a snigger, and one of his fellow-clerks asked how duchesses gave their cards. And then the buzz went on, and all were on the *qui vive* for the door to open; but, as is known, Stella did not pass through the room again, and the next time they met her she was with the housekeeper, to whom she was talking quite pleasantly. So that she could condescend when she liked, they discovered.

All the same, Stella might have been set down as proud and stuck-up, and been more unpopular than she was, though that probably would have troubled her little but for what occurred that afternoon, which, much as it annoyed her, was a very good thing.

The junior partner, it will be remembered, had had to wait for his typist while she packed up and took leave of her Highland home, and then motored leisurely to town, and certain foreign letters had got in arrears, and the junior partner was anxious to get through them.

Consequently, when Vava called for her sister the latter was very busy. The girl knew where the office was, but she did not know which door she ought to knock at; then she saw 'Baines, Jones & Co.—Clerks' Room.' One of the girls at school had called Stella a 'clerk,' when Vava had said 'secretary,' which sounded better. So at this door the girl knocked, and in answer to a loud 'Come in!' she entered.

Twenty heads were lifted and looked at her; but Vava was not self-conscious. She went forward, and with a friendly smile said, 'I have called for my sister. May I sit here till she is ready?'

'Certainly—that is, yes. Take a seat, miss, till I tell the boss,' said a youth, stammering rather, for it was awkward to refuse a young lady; but that was not the place for her to wait.

'No, don't tell any one. Stella said I was not to interrupt her, as she's only a paid servant like you; so just you go on with your work, and don't waste your time like the idle apprentice in the tale.'

Vava had not spoken loud, and did not know that her words were overheard by the whole room; still less was she aware that the young man of about thirty who had come in while she was speaking was the young boss and her sister's employer.

The boy to whom she had spoken had his back to him, and answered in rather an aggrieved tone, 'I'm not wasting my time; I had to answer you, and I must tell Mr. Jones, for I don't know that he'd like you to wait here; this isn't the lady's waiting-room, you know!'

'Mr. Jones won't mind,' said that gentleman, coming forward, and adding, 'So you are Miss Wharton's sister?'

'Yes, but I don't want to be in the way; you all seem very busy. Can I help you? I can write an awfully good hand, just like Stella's; she taught me, you know,' said Vava.

A smile went round the room; but Mr. Jones said quite gravely, 'That is very kind of you, and perhaps when we are hard pressed I shall take advantage of that offer; but your sister has done so much to-day that I think she will soon be ready for you.'

'Oh are you Mr. Jones?' said Vava, holding out her hand. 'I know some more Joneses, only they are'——

'Yes, it's a very common name, almost the commonest in England and Wales—rather a nuisance. But come along with me, and I will take you to your sister,' he said.

'Good-bye,' said Vava, nodding to the boy she had called the 'idle apprentice.'

'So the beauty's name is Stella!' observed one of the young men.

But he got no further. 'Shut up, Jim, and don't be such a cad as to take advantage of that youngster's friendly ways. If ever I hear any of you making free with Miss Wharton's name he'll regret it,' said the clerk in charge of the room, and his feelings on the subject were evidently shared by the rest of his fellow-clerks, for one or two of them said, by way of agreement, 'Yes, she's a nice little girl; evidently just up from the country, and not used to this kind of life, and in mourning too.'

So Stella was allowed to come and go, with no more attention or notice than the

raising of their hats as they passed her, and it is to be doubted whether she could at the end of six months have recognised one of them if she had been required for any reason to do so.

Mr. Jones meanwhile took Vava into his own room, and sitting down began to talk to her of her new school and schoolfellows.

'They're all right, and the school is all right, and I like the mistresses, especially the one that takes my class—she looks so honest,' announced Vava.

'Don't the others look honest?' inquired Mr. Jones, looking amused. He had noticed that Vava spoke a little evasively of the school and its pupils as being 'all right,' which sounded qualified praise, and he was, or appeared to be, very much interested in her conversation.

'Oh I don't know; I didn't mean anything. I just liked Miss Courteney's face best, and I shall get to like the girls when I can understand them.' Here Vava laughed. 'They say some words so funnily;' and she tried to imitate them.

Mr. James Jones laughed heartily, and Vava, encouraged by him, was taking off some of her schoolfellows when Stella came to the door. Her face was a study, and both Mr. Jones and Vava jumped up with the air of culprits, as if they had been discovered doing wrong.

'I have brought the letters.—Vava, go into the housekeeper's room, please; you are interrupting Mr. Jones,' said the elder sister, holding open the door 'like an avenging angel,' as the junior partner afterwards said.



CHAPTER VI.

IN LONELY LODGINGS.

When the two girls stood outside the door they turned and looked at each other for a moment, and then without a word Stella led the way down the corridor to her own little room.

Nothing could have had a greater effect upon Vava, who would far rather have had a good scolding than this silent disapproval. 'Is this your sitting-room, Stella? What a nice one, and you have a fire; it has been rather cold at school,' said the girl in a repressed voice as she spread out her hands to the blaze.

Then Stella's heart melted. To be sure, Vava had been very disobedient; she had been told to speak to no one, but to learn her lessons quietly while she was waiting. Instead of which, Stella—remembering the voices she had heard in the next room—felt sure she had been talking in her free way with every one. Still, it was their first day alone in London, and Vava looked so unlike herself with the joy and brightness gone out of her face, so she said kindly, if gravely, 'Yes, this is my room, and another time, please, come straight here, unless I come and call for you, which would be better, I think, if you do not obey me. But let me hear about school. I hope they have fires there?'

'Oh yes, but I was sitting near a window, and my feet and hands got cold with having to sit still so long, I suppose; the girls say they get chilblains as soon as they come back to school,' replied Vava.

'You must wear mittens and warm house-shoes. But about the school, Vava—do you like it? Are you glad to go to school?'

'Not much; but, Stella, don't send me away from you. I will do what you tell me, really; I promise I will, unless I forget. I forgot to-day, or I would not have talked to any one. I know you're awfully angry with me; but I think I was a little flustered by all the crowds in the streets, and I just went into the first room where I saw Baines, Jones & Co. written!' cried Vava eagerly.

'I understand that you were bewildered; but you must try and remember that you are not at Lomore, and that you must not make friends without my leave, or else

I shall feel that I cannot take care of you, and that it's not right to keep you with me,' said Stella.

'Then I shall die in this dreadful place without you,' declared Vava in tragic tones.

'Vava, something has happened. What is it? What has made you take such a dislike to London? You liked it well enough yesterday,' exclaimed Stella anxiously. She had been putting on her hat and coat as she spoke, and had just said this, when Mrs. Ryan, the housekeeper, came in with a tray, on which there were two cups of tea and delicious thin bread and butter and cakes.

'I have brought you a warm cup of tea to keep the cold out on your way home, and one for this young lady, who is your sister, as is plain to see. Dear, dear! and to think of you two poor lambs all alone! My dear, don't be offended with me; but if, as you say, you have no relations or friends in London, I hope you'll count me as one, and come to me if you are in any trouble, just as if I were'—a fine tact made the old Irishwoman say, 'your old housekeeper,' instead of 'your mother.'

Stella held out her hand and smiled. 'Thank you, Mrs. Ryan; indeed you are a friend, and I will come to you for advice,' she said.

'And, do you know, you remind me a little of nursie, our housekeeper at Lomore, only she is Scotch; but I can understand your way of speaking, and that's more than I can the people at school,' Vava remarked, with such a tone of disgust that the other two laughed.

But Stella looked relieved. 'So that's it, is it? I suppose they laughed at you for talking with a Scotch accent? I have often told you, Vava, that you should not copy old Duncan as you did,' protested Stella; for Vava talked much broader Scotch than Stella, and used words which are not in use or understood south of the Border.

'They're stupid things, and I don't want to talk like them. Anyway, they don't pronounce lots of their words right; they say "wat" and "ware" for "what" and "where;" so of course I got a lot of mistakes in my English dictation. But I beat them in my French,' she wound up triumphantly.

'You'll soon get used to that, miss, and there isn't a better school in London than the one you're at; there's no money spared on it, for it's a rich company that has

it, though I don't know exactly why they have it,' said Mrs. Ryan.

'I do; a rich merchant's wife founded it!' cried Vava, and poured forth the history of the foundation of the school to her two listeners, till Stella stopped her.

'Now, Vava, we must not keep Mrs. Ryan.—My sister does not understand that the City is the place for business, not for paying visits or amusing one's self; and you might tell her that she must not make acquaintance with strangers,' said Stella, turning to Mrs. Ryan.

Mrs. Ryan raised her hands in amazement at such imprudence. 'Indeed no. There was a young girl I knew up from the country, and one day she was taking her ticket at one of the London stations, and there was rather a crowd, so, being timid, she stepped back and waited; then who should come up to her but a gentleman, as she called him, and, taking off his hat as polite as could be, says, "Can I take your ticket for you, miss? It's not fit for you to be pushing into a rough crowd like that;" and she, like the silly she was, thanks him and hands him her purse with all her week's money in it; and off he goes.' Here Mrs. Ryan ended, and nodded her head at Vava.

But Vava in her innocence did not understand the moral of the story, and said simply, 'That was very kind of him?'

'Yes, very kind! But he never got the ticket, and the poor girl never saw her purse nor the kind gentleman again,' explained Mrs. Ryan.

Vava's eyes were wide with horror. 'What a wicked, cruel man! But everybody can't be wicked like that!' she cried.

'No, indeed; thank God, there are many good people here; but there are rogues as well, and as you are too young to know the one from the other you must not talk to any of them,' Mrs. Ryan said.

The story made Vava very thoughtful. 'I wonder whether Mr. Jones is a rogue?' she said musingly.

But Mrs. Ryan was scandalised. 'Sakes alive, miss, don't say such a thing in his own office! He is one of the best and most respected gentlemen in the City of London, as I well know, having worked for him and his father this thirty years!' she exclaimed.

'Vava lets her tongue run away with her.—Come, Vava, we really must be going,'

said Stella hastily, and she took her younger sister off with her.

It was dusk now, but the two enjoyed their walk back along the Embankment, for it did not occur to them to take a bus or train; three miles was nothing to them. Moreover, they had had tea, and were in no hurry to get back to their cramped lodgings. It was well that Vava could not see her sister's amused smile, which broke out several times on the way home at the remembrance of the younger girl's suggestion that the junior partner might be a rogue; and it is to be feared that Stella would not have been sorry if her employer—whom she suspected unjustly of thinking a good deal of himself and of wishing to patronise her and pity her for having 'come down in the world'—had heard Vava's remark.

It might have gratified her if she had known that Mrs. Ryan went straight to her master and told him the whole story.

Mr. James, as she called him, laughed heartily. 'I'm sure that's what her elder sister thinks me. Well, it does not much matter, as long as she does her work as well as she did to-day, so business-like and correctly—first accurate young woman I have ever met with; and the poor thing will have a better time here than she would with many firms. You will be sure to look after her well, Mrs. Ryan? My father is most particular that she should be comfortable—as comfortable as possible, that is to say; so be sure and give her tea before she goes, or anything she wants.'

From which conversation it will be seen that Mr. Stacey had found a good berth for his young client, and had evidently given her a high testimonial.

It was six o'clock by the time the girls reached Vincent Street, and they seated themselves on uncomfortable arm-chairs in front of the smoky fire, which they lit as soon as they got in. Vava had her lessons to do; but after their tea-supper, for which the landlady declined to cook anything but eggs—'London eggs,' as Vava said—Stella looked round for something to do. There was no piano, she had no books, nor was she fond of fancy-work, and of useful work she had none, for 'nursie' had always done most of the mending for her young ladies, though she had taught them both to work. Before they left home she had set their wardrobes in thorough order. 'So that you'll not have to trouble about them for a long while yet; and perhaps, who knows, the Lord may have made a way for me to come to you before they need looking to again,' the old woman had said, with some kind of idea that her beautiful young mistress would not somehow be left by Providence in a position for which she was so unfitted, in the old

housekeeper's opinion.

So now Stella looked round for something to do, and finding nothing, passed a dreary evening, till Vava had finished preparing her lessons, and said with a yawn, 'Let's go to bed, Stella. What's the good of sitting up, staring at this horrid wall-paper with those hideous flowers that aren't like any flowers that ever grew in a garden?'

Stella gave a sigh, which, in spite of all her resolutions to be brave, she could not suppress. 'It is not very comfortable here, to be sure; but I don't know where else to go. There is a large kind of ladies' residential club near here, but I do not know if we should like it, and we should have no private sitting-room; so you would have to prepare your lessons in your bedroom, which I dislike,' she replied.

'Oh that would be horrid; the room would get so hot and stuffy, and we should not sleep. I wish we could have a little house of our own. I am sure there must be little houses to let that we could afford, like the one Dr M'Farlane's sisters lived in at Lomore.'

'We will go and have a look to-morrow on our way home,' said Stella, smiling. She was glad of something to look forward to besides going to the City. She had only had one day of it; but she disliked it intensely, and asked herself how she was to bear her life with nothing but this to look forward to through the long years. Yet, if she had but known it, she was extremely fortunate, and her lot was a far better one than it might have been but for the influence of kind friends.

And so the two tired heads were laid down to rest, intending, in their ignorance, to look for a small house which they could rent, and which would be more comfortable and no more expensive than their present abode. Next day, however, was wet, and they had quite enough walking to the City and back, and came in at five o'clock, with another long evening before them, lightened in Stella's case by a book from the library of her City Club for Lady-Clerks; so that it was not until Friday that the two girls looked about on their way home for a small house to let.

Vava, who seemed singularly uncommunicative about her life at school, was quite eager in the search for this ideal small house, and looked up each street they passed by to see if there were any prospect of its being found there.

'I think, Vava, it will be no use looking so near the City. Mrs. Ryan tells me that rents are very high here; Westminster is a cheaper part,' said Stella.

'Still, there's no harm in looking, I'm sure. I have seen quite small houses that can't cost much,' said Vava; and at last she cried out with delight at sight of quite a small-looking house, jammed between two large buildings, which bore the words, 'To Let.' It was situated in one of the narrow streets leading from the Strand to the river.

Stella looked doubtfully at it. 'I think it is larger than it looks, Vava, and we really only need five or six rooms; and you know we must not give too much rent, for I do not want to spend all our income,' she said gravely.

'I'm sure this will be quite cheap. Do let's ask,' said Vava impatiently.

So urged, Stella rang the bell marked 'Caretaker;' and after a long wait, a grim and unfriendly-looking man appeared.

'Would you please tell me the rent of this house?' inquired Stella.

'Do you want an office in it?' inquired the caretaker.

'No-o. I wanted to know the rent of the whole house,' said the girl.

The man looked at her curiously; but she looked so grave and dignified that he concluded that she was sent by some one else. 'Well, the rent's three hundred pounds on a long lease, you may tell them,' he informed her.

'Thank you,' said Stella quietly, and turned away.

'Three hundred pounds for that dirty little house! Oh London is a horrid place, Stella! Let's go back to Lomore!' cried Vava.

Stella wished they could; but her sense of duty came to her aid, and she said, 'That is quite impossible, Vava; we must stay in London. So the best thing we can do is to try and be as happy as we can here, and do our duty. We will live upon as little as we can, and save money, so that we can go away for our holidays.'

These same holidays, if she had but known it, were a most unusual thing; for Stella was to have a month in the summer, and ten days at Easter. And the two began to plan a delightful Easter at the seaside somewhere, and by the time they got home to their lodgings Vava was quite cheerful again.

CHAPTER VII.

KIND-HEARTED LONDONERS.

'Oh Stella, it's a mist, a blacky-yellow mist—I mean a fog! How horrid! What shall I do here all by myself while you are in the City? And how will you get there? I shall be so frightened all the morning, thinking you are lost. Can't I come with you? I will sit quite quietly in your room while you are writing, and perhaps I could help you!' cried Vava on the second Saturday morning, when she woke up to find London quite dark and enveloped in a yellow fog.

'I can't take you with me, Vava; it would never do. That is not my room; it is Messrs Baines & Jones's room. If I brought you there to help me it would look as if I had too much to do, which is not true,' replied Stella.

'Then let me stop with Mrs. Ryan. I will do my lessons, and sew that horrid piece of needlework I have to get done by next sewing-lesson. Don't leave me in this poky little place by myself,' pleaded Vava.

As a matter of fact, Stella hated these Saturdays, when she had to go to the City alone, because Vava had no school that day, and to-day she was really nervous of the fog. So she said doubtfully, 'If you promise to stop quietly in Mrs. Ryan's room, and not go out of it on any excuse until I come to fetch you, I will take you, though it is rather extravagant, for we shall have to go by omnibus.'

'Never mind, it will be my Saturday's treat,' said Vava; and the two set out for the City.

Mrs. Ryan held up her hands at sight of them. 'There's brave young ladies! Not one of the young ladies of Philips's downstairs have come yet, and three of them that live some way off have sent telephone messages to say it's too thick their way, and they want to be excused.'

'I want to be excused for bringing Vava. She would not be left alone, and was sure you would not mind her sitting quietly in your room doing her lessons. I hope you will not mind?' said Stella.

'Mind! Why, I'm only too glad of a bit of company, and Miss Vava's as welcome

as the sunshine would be, for it's what she reminds me of!' cried Mrs. Ryan heartily.

Mr. James looked up in surprise at sight of Stella. 'Miss Wharton! I did not expect you to-day; it is one of the worst fogs we have had for years. I wonder you found your way, as you are not used to London!' he exclaimed.

'The omnibus took me all the way,' said Stella gravely, and opened her note-book to take down her instructions; and Mr. James, who very seldom ventured to make even a remark like that, turned to business; but when his secretary had gone, and the darkness became thicker still, he looked uneasily out of the window, and then rang for the housekeeper.

'Mrs. Ryan, the fog is getting worse; I don't think that Miss Wharton ought to go home alone,' he began, looking disturbed.

'She's not alone, sir, begging your pardon; her little sister is here in my room,' observed the housekeeper.

The young man looked relieved. 'That's a good thing; she has really got more sense than the elder one in some ways. But how on earth are they to get back? I'd offer to take them in my car, only she'd fly down my throat,' he said with an aggrieved air.

'And begging your pardon again, sir, I think the more of Miss Wharton for her proper pride; but if I might make so bold as to suggest it, you might send the motor back for them,' suggested Mrs. Ryan.

'By all means; they're welcome to it as much as they like. I'll tell you what, Mrs. Ryan, they'll have to stop till it comes back. Suppose you give them lunch? I'll have it sent in, and you will tell them it's the custom of the firm. I'd like to give that little girl some pleasure; I'm sure her life's dull enough. I hear her sister won't let her make friends with the girls at school, and they don't know a soul else in London, for she told Miss Upjohn so,' said Mr. James, who talked to Mrs. Ryan very freely, as she was an old servant of the family.

Mrs. Ryan was only too pleased to do anything for the Misses Wharton, to whom she had taken a great fancy, and promised to see to the lunch.

Vava sat and learnt her lessons very conscientiously while Mrs. Ryan went about her duties. After a while Mr. James, who had a message to give the housekeeper, and probably found time hang heavy on his hands this morning—for it was not a

day for callers—came to the housekeeper's room.

'Well, and what have you got to say about our English climate?' was his greeting.

Vava put down her English grammar with relief. 'Nothing good,' she said, laughing and shaking her head.

'It's like swallowing nasty-tasting flannel, isn't it?' he agreed.

'Yes, and it's getting worse; it was bad enough getting here, and how on earth we are going to get back nobody knows,' said Vava, as she looked out of the window at the fog, which got thicker and thicker, and was enough to frighten any country-bred girl, though Vava would not own it.

'Then I must be "nobody," because I know,' he said.

Vava looked up in surprise, and then guessing that he meant to take them home, a kindness she knew Stella would not accept, she said, 'We shall go in a bus, thank you, and I'm not as afraid as you think, for I've often been out in a mist at home, and they are more dangerous than this, for they come on suddenly, and you can't see a thing.'

'Mrs. Ryan does not approve of the bus; besides, they do not seem to be running. So she suggests your going in my car, which will come back for you after it has taken me home. Will you tell your sister it's the only thing to do?' asked Mr. James.

It did not strike Vava that the junior partner might have given his own message to his secretary, and agreed to deliver it; and, as Mrs. Ryan backed her up, Stella gave way.

'Baines & Jones are a very good firm to work for, and they look after their people well. After all, why shouldn't they? They're rich enough, and it's good policy, for they get well served; so you may eat this lunch quite comfortably, for they say you are the best lady they've had for a long time; you know French so well, and you write first-rate business letters. So you've earned your lunch for that, if you hadn't earned it by coming through such an awful fog to-day,' explained Mrs. Ryan, as she served lunch for the two sisters.

Mrs. Ryan would not exactly say, as her master told her, that it was the custom to give lunch; in fact, at sight of the menu she was told to get she was half-afraid Miss Wharton would refuse it, for chicken and cherry-tart with cream, followed

by coffee and dessert, was rather a grand lunch to send in for a City clerk.

But Stella in her ignorance supposed it was usual; City dinners always were rich, like the givers, she knew.

'Isn't this lovely? I wish it would often be a fog; this is better than going to a stuffy restaurant,' announced Vava; and Mrs. Ryan determined to tell the kind-hearted giver of the pleasure his lunch had given.

But there was more pleasure to come. In about an hour the motor came back for them, and they started off very slowly. After a quarter of an hour they came to a stop, owing to a block at one of the bridges over the Thames.

'It's funny it should be so thick here; it's lovely a few miles out,' said the chauffeur, turning to address his passengers.

'How I wish we were a few miles out too, then!' cried Vava impulsively.

The two girls did not see a half-amused look that came into the staid and respectable man's eyes as he replied, 'Well, miss, I have to take a run down to Brighton, and if you would let me turn off south over this bridge I could take you there almost as soon as I could take you home at the rate we're going, and perhaps by the time we got back it would be fine again?'

Put like this, it sounded almost a favour to the chauffeur to let him get his business over first; though, perhaps, if they had had time to think, Stella at least would have bethought her that Brighton was slightly out of the way from the City to Westminster!

But Vava's cry of 'Oh do, Stella, do! I should so like to see the sea again,' settled it.

'There's plenty of rugs there, miss,' said the man, as he turned over the bridge with the same amused smile, and, as he had said, soon brought them into a better atmosphere, and finally to Brighton, where the sun was shining.

'If you'll let me know what time you wish to go back, miss, I'll meet you wherever you like,' said the chauffeur, touching his hat.

'As soon as your business is done, of course,' said Stella.

'Oh well'—here the man coughed—'yes, of course. Well, my business won't take long; but I haven't to get back for anything to-day, and my master said I could

stop a bit. But, of course, if you are in a hurry'——he replied.

Stella looked doubtful, and consulted her watch. It was half-past three; they had another hour and a half of daylight, and it was very nice by the sea.

'There's no hurry at all, Stella; there's lots to see and do here.—You'll want to have some dinner, won't you?' Vava added, turning to the man.

'I'd be glad to see some friends I've got down here, and they'll look after me. Would seven o'clock suit you, young ladies?'

Again Stella agreed; but a feeling, which she could not define, that she was being managed somehow came over her. But she forgot it in the pleasure of the brisk walk by the sea, the visit to the aquarium, and, finally, listening to the band on the pier.

'Stella, I've come to the conclusion that we are wrong about London people,' announced Vava, as they sat in a sheltered corner listening to the music.

'How, Vava?' asked her sister.

'Nursie always used to say they were hard and selfish and suspicious, and I find that they are very kind. First there were the Montague Joneses, and now there's Mrs. Ryan and your Mr. Jones and this chauffeur, all being as kind as can be,' explained Vava.

'He's not my Mr. Jones,' said Stella sharply, taking up the offensive words. Then she continued, 'Yes, they are kind; but I do not much like accepting kindnesses we cannot return.'

'But we do return it by enjoying ourselves and thanking them, and you heard Mrs. Ryan say that the firm wanted to reward your good work, or, at least, that was what she meant, and you do work hard, and do overtime too sometimes; and I am going to knit a Shetland shawl for Mrs. Ryan, so that will be doing her a kindness in return,' declared Vava.

Stella sighed. 'I wish I were like you, able to enjoy everything, Vava,' she said half-sadly. To the proud, reserved girl, her present life was intolerable.

'Oh don't, Stella! Fancy, if you were like me, really! We should get into all sorts of muddles; besides, people would not be so kind to us!' she added shrewdly.

Stella refrained from asking her what she meant; for she knew too, and, funnily

enough, resented the attention which her beauty brought her. However, Vava's words did good; and Stella, whatever she might say, did enjoy the trip. And she thanked the chauffeur so prettily that the man was quite captivated.

'I am sure, miss, it's been a pleasure, and I only hope I shall have the same pleasure again;' and he would have said more, but on the whole he thought it wiser not to do so.

'This has been the nicest day we have spent since we came to London,' Vava assured the man, smiling and nodding at him as he respectfully took his leave.

Stella looked very grave as she put her latch-key into the front-door of their lodgings. 'I am not sure that it is a wise thing to take these treats; it only seems to make you dissatisfied with the outings that I can afford.'

'Indeed it does not, only I liked seeing the sea, and I do love rushing through the country in a motor; but I enjoyed the Tower very much, and I shall enjoy the Houses of Parliament next Saturday all the more for having had a change in between. Besides, it was delightful to get out of that awful fog; we could not have done anything to-day if we had stayed in London except sit in this little room with the gas lit. It was kind of Mr. James.'

'Yes,' agreed Stella; but she did not think it necessary to tell Vava that she was not going to accept such kindnesses in future, however much Mrs. Ryan might say it was 'the custom of the firm.'



CHAPTER VIII.

GOOD MANNERS.

'Do you think you can walk to school by yourself this morning, Vava?' inquired Stella a little doubtfully as they stood at the parting of their ways one week-day morning in the City. Stella had always walked to the school-gates with her younger sister; but to-day she had work waiting her at the office, and she was anxious to get there early.

'Of course I can; I'm the only girl in the whole school who is taken to school like a kindergarten child, and some of them even come quite alone without their nurses or any grown-up person!' cried Vava, airing what was rather a grievance with her.

Stella put on her most dignified air. 'Very possibly; but I do not wish to be taught manners by your schoolfellows or their parents. That class of person does not go in for chaperons,' she said in her clear voice.

'Oh Stella!' cried Vava, flushing crimson and looking very vexed.

'What is the matter, Vava?' exclaimed Stella in astonishment.

'That was one of the girls in my form, and she heard you!' protested Vava.

Stella looked as vexed as Vava; she would not for worlds hurt any one's feelings willingly, and she knew too that she ought not to have said what she did; but pride was Stella's besetting sin, and she hated having to mix with people whom she considered her inferiors, and her present life and surroundings only made her prouder.

'I am sorry; I forgot we were so near the school. Perhaps she did not understand me. You say the girls find your Scotch accent difficult to follow?' suggested the girl.

'Well, good-bye,' said Vava; and went off one way, while Stella turned down the street leading to her office without further comment.

When she had left her sister, Stella thought no more of her unfortunate speech. It

had been unwise; but, after all, it was quite true. And if the girl had overheard it all, the worst she could think was that Vava's sister was proud, and that she thought herself superior to the pupils of the City School for Girls, which last, Stella privately thought, they could see for themselves.

But Vava did not forget it, and looked very gloomy as she walked along, her eyes looking straight in front of her, not seeing any one.

'Hallo, Vava Wharton! Where are you—in the moon, wool-gathering?' inquired a hearty voice beside her, and a rather stout, common-looking girl, who, however, was nicely dressed and had a pleasant face, patted her on the back.

'Oh Doreen! you startled me. I was thinking!' ejaculated Vava.

'Not very pleasant thoughts, by the look of you,' said Doreen, with a sharp look at Vava's grave face.

'No, they were not,' admitted Vava.

'What's the row? Not any trouble at home, I hope?' asked the girl kindly, and her rough, boisterous voice grew quite gentle.

'I have no home,' said Vava.

'I'm sorry; but you have a sister, and, I say, isn't she a beauty? You're lucky to have her; I have no sister. If it's anything I can help about you may as well tell me; come, out with it. You'll be in the dumps all day if you've got it on your mind. Is it the lessons?'

'No, it's nothing to do with school; at least—well, it's something my sister said about school just now that is bothering me.'

'Doesn't she think you are getting on well, or working hard enough? Because, if that is all, you just introduce me to her to-morrow morning, and let me talk to her, and I'll soon teach her different,' said the girl cheerfully.

Vava thought to herself that Doreen would not have made this suggestion if she had overheard Stella's opinion of her schoolfellows, and she felt that, kind though she was, Doreen was the last girl she would like to introduce to her sister. 'It was just a stupid remark my sister made about the manners at school,' explained Vava.

'The manners at school? Why, we're supposed to have very good manners! I'm

sure we're always being drilled in good manners by Miss Upjohn, and the inspectors and visitors always say there's such a good tone among the girls!' exclaimed Doreen, and she looked at Vava as if she suspected her of having taken some tales to her sister, or made some complaint about them. Then as Vava did not answer, for she could not very well explain the true facts of the case, Doreen went on, 'I suppose you think we are not too civil to you about your Scotch accent; but, if we laughed, we didn't mean it unkindly. It's no use being too thin-skinned in this world. I should think your sister was rather too delicate for roughing it in London; she looks as if she ought to be a duchess, not a City clerk.'

'That's just it!' burst forth Vava impulsively.

'Is that what's bothering you? Well, I shouldn't worry about that. Some rich man will come along and marry her before long, you'll see; she's far too pretty to remain single. But,' she added, as a thought struck her, 'why did you first say it was our bad manners that upset you, and then that it was your sister being a clerk?'

Then Vava told the whole story, adding, 'I hope you are not offended? Stella only meant'——

'She only meant that you are a cut above the rest of us, and it's quite true, and of course we know that. Why, the first day you came in with her we thought it was some grand visitor coming. I'm sorry Rosie Brown overheard it; she can be nasty when she likes, and she considers herself some one too, for her father is an alderman. Anyway, I'm glad you've told me, and I'll tackle her if she says anything,' declared Doreen, not letting Vava finish her apology.

'Oh I hope she won't; the girls will be so annoyed!' cried Vava in a fright.

'It's not your fault; they won't blame you; I'm sure you're pleasant and friendly enough with them all. Anyhow, as I said before, I'll give them a piece of my mind if they say anything, and I'll be your friend if you'll let me. Of course, I know you are a lady and I'm not, and I don't talk good grammar and you do, though you roll your "r's" and say "what" in a funny way; but I'd like to talk better if you'll learn me. You see, I am to be a teacher one day, and it'll stand in my way, and father says a good education is a fortune,' answered Doreen.

'I'll teach you, not "learn" you, if I can; for our governess did teach us grammar, and our father was very particular how we spoke, so I suppose we do speak

better than a great many girls,' said Vava, laughing and looking quite bright again.

'And we'll be chums?' demanded the girl.

'Yes, if you like,' agreed Vava, not seeing very well how she was to get out of it, but wondering what Stella would say to her choice of a friend. As they entered the playground she saw Rosie Brown the centre of a little group of girls, who looked up as she came in, and then looked away again, without nodding good-morning as usual.

Vava's heart sank; but Doreen said in her loud cheery voice, 'Hallo, you there! What are you all confabbing about so mysteriously? Nice manners that!' she wound up purposely.

'Oh we can't all have the manners of your friend Lady Clara Vere de Vere! I wonder she condescends to talk to you or come to our school at all with the people of our class,' said one of the girls.

Vava's colour rose, but she walked on without taking the least notice of what was said.

Not so, Doreen. She stopped in front of them, and demanded loudly, 'What do you mean by that? I have no titled friend, because I'm only a tradesman's daughter, and very proud of the fact, for he earned every penny he's got honestly, which is more than you can say of some grand people.'

'We don't mean anything to do with you, Doreen; you don't give yourself airs or despise us; but if you knew what Vava Wharton thinks of you, you wouldn't walk with her!' said Rosie Brown.

'Wouldn't I? Well, I just should, then, for she's my chum, and any one who speaks against her speaks against me. And, pray, how do you know what she thinks of me? Has she been telling you?' inquired Doreen, standing square and uncompromising before the angry group.

'She thinks you're no class, as she does the rest of us,' said Rosie Brown.

Doreen turned on her. 'Does she? She's never shown any signs of it. No one could be nicer and more friendly than Vava Wharton has been ever since she has been here, and I shouldn't have thought she was one to go behind my back and say I was no class, especially to you, Rosie. Anyway, I've a right to know what

she said about me,' demanded Doreen, who knew very well what Rosie meant, and that she was putting her in an awkward position.

'If she didn't, that stuck-up sister of hers did,' said Rosie sulkily.

'Well, I shouldn't call her stuck-up after she has been talking to you,' observed Doreen sarcastically.

'*She* talk to me! She wouldn't demean herself by addressing a word to any one under a duke. I happened to overhear a remark she made,' said Rosie, falling into the trap.

'And you repeated a private remark that you listened to? That's nice and honourable, anyway. I wonder what Miss Upjohn would say if she heard of it? But you mind one thing, all of you—if you choose to take any notice of anything heard by eavesdropping, you can. I call it playing it low down; but you're not going to annoy Vava Wharton, who is not to blame one bit, and if you do I'll just go straight to the head-mistress and tell her, and we'll see what she says about honour,' announced Doreen. Having said so, she turned on her heel and followed Vava into the cloak-room, leaving the little group of girls—to whom she had given 'a piece of her mind,' as she called it—looking rather crestfallen.

'All the same, she does consider herself better than us, or why does she say good-bye so quickly if she sees her sister, and sit next a mistress at lunch?' inquired Rosie.

'It's a free country, I suppose she can do as she likes. I believe she told me she had come from a lonely part of Scotland, and wasn't used to living in a great city, and that crowds rather frightened her,' observed a girl who looked rather ashamed of having listened to this tittle-tattle.

'It's all right. I've shut her up, mean eavesdropper, and made them all feel ashamed of themselves; so don't you worry about it any more,' Doreen whispered to Vava, as she took off her boots and put on school-shoes.

'Oh thank you,' was all Vava said, and she felt very grateful and friendly toward Doreen; but during the day she found herself wondering what Stella would say to this new friend, for she was sure Doreen would expect to be introduced to Stella if they met on the way to school, which they were pretty sure to do. And, grateful as she was to Doreen for her championship, she found herself wishing that the girl was a little more refined. However, Vava was no snob, and she

determined to face facts and tell Stella she must be friends with Doreen, and so she did.

Stella heard her without making any remark, until Vava said, 'And, of course, you need not speak to her if she comes up to us in the street; she's sure to do that, because she has not very good manners.'

'She has very good principles and a good heart, which are more important, and I shall certainly stop and thank her for being so kind to you this morning,' remarked Stella.

Vava was so surprised that she stared at Stella. 'But—but she's not a lady, Stella, and she talks dreadful grammar sometimes; but she asked me to correct her, so she is trying to improve,' Vava observed.

'I don't suppose you will learn bad grammar from her, and as you only see her in school you will not be too much in her company.'

All the same, Vava was glad the next morning that they did not meet Doreen, and sorry the morning after when they did. To her surprise, Doreen only nodded when she caught sight of them, and walked on the other side of the street.

'Who is that, Vava?' inquired Stella, seeing her nod to some one.

'That is Doreen,' replied Vava.

'Tell her to come and speak to me; I should like to know her,' announced Stella.

Vava ran across to Doreen, and gave Stella's message.

'Does she really? May I really?' stammered Doreen, quite flustered.

'Yes, of course; she's not a bit stiff when you know her,' Vava assured her, for she guessed that Doreen was a little afraid of the stately lady in black.

But Stella gave her lovely smile, and Doreen forgot her fears as she gazed in frank admiration at Miss Wharton, who said, 'Thank you for being so nice to Vava yesterday. I ought not to have said what I did, for, after all, you showed better manners than I.'

'Oh but I didn't. I'd love to have manners like you; and father said, when I told him last night, that it was only a natural remark, and that people would always be divided into classes as long as the world lasted, and that it was very hard on

you having to come down from your class and mix with us; but that you'd find we'd a lot of good in us, though we had no manners,' cried Doreen eagerly.

'I am sure of it,' said Stella, who did not seem to mind the girl's plain speaking.

Doreen looked at Stella suddenly, and gave a great sigh. She was quite at ease with her, Vava noticed with surprise, and with still greater surprise that Stella seemed to like her and not to notice her rough speech. 'Well, what was that sigh for?' Stella asked, smiling.

'You are so beautiful,' said Doreen bluntly.

Stella coloured a little, and laughed as she said, 'I am glad you think so; I don't think I am very different from other girls.' And then they said good-bye to each other.

'She is as different as chalk from cheese!' cried Doreen enthusiastically to Vava.

'I don't think she's proud of being pretty; she never seems to notice that,' said Vava; and she went into school much happier than she had felt the day before, and relieved to think that she might make friends with Doreen, whose fine character made her rather popular at school.



CHAPTER IX.

THE ENTERPRISE CLUB.

In one of the City of London's busiest thoroughfares, among the numerous plates bearing the names and callings of the occupants of the different chambers or offices in a certain big building, is a small plate with the words 'Enterprise Club.' That is all the outward sign of the fact that the only ladies' club in the City, a veritable haven of refuge for lady-clerks and secretaries, has its quarters here.

It was here that Stella sat one lunch-time, looking so worried that a ladylike-looking girl, to whom she had spoken once or twice, asked her if she had a headache.

'No, no, thank you; I am quite well,' replied Stella, her brows still knitted.

The girls at the Enterprise contented themselves with a nod of the head, or a 'Good-morning,' to Stella, whom they put down as proud and stuck-up. But this girl had gone a little farther, and had even elicited the fact that she had a younger sister; and to-day, seeing Miss Wharton look so grave, it occurred to her that it might be something connected with this younger sister that was troubling her, and she asked, 'Is your sister quite well? I have never seen her here. Doesn't she ever come?'

'My sister? No, she is not a member; she is only a schoolgirl. I did not think it would be allowed,' said Stella.

'She could come as a visitor, and I am sure if you asked the secretary she would make an exception and allow her to join. It would be so nice if she could stay and play cards or dominoes after office hours on these cold winter afternoons,' suggested the girl.

Stella's face brightened up so wonderfully that her companion guessed that this was the difficulty. 'If she could, I should be so glad; she is very good, but she feels the dullness of life in lodgings, and I am beginning to be quite anxious about her. She would like to come here sometimes, I am sure.'

'Then let us ask the secretary at once, and she can come this evening,' suggested

the good-natured girl.

The secretary gave a ready consent, and that afternoon, instead of going straight home, Vava was brought into the Enterprise Club, and sank with a little exclamation of pleasure into one of the comfortable easy-chairs, and looked round the tastefully furnished room. She was soon invited to play a game of draughts by one of the younger girls, for Vava did not inspire awe as Stella did.

'If next Saturday is wet or horrid like last Saturday, I shall ask Stella to bring me here,' Vava announced, as she moved one of her 'men.'

'On Saturday! I should have thought you would want to get away from the City as soon as possible! I should, I know,' said the other.

'But you are staying this evening,' Vava pointed out.

'That is because my chum Amy is working late; I always wait for her rather than go home alone; but on Saturdays we generally go for a long bicycle ride or something, to get some fresh air and fresh ideas,' announced the girl, hopping over two of Vava's 'men.'

'I wish I rode a bicycle; but we always rode horses in Scotland—at least Stella did; I had a pony,' explained Vava.

'This must be a change for you!' cried the other; but said no more, for the game absorbed her attention.

But the result of this conversation was that, the next Saturday being wet, Vava's opponent suddenly said to her chum, 'Amy, we can't cycle to-day; suppose we lunch at the Enterprise, and have some games with those two new girls in mourning?'

'Oh the Misses Wharton? Have you fallen in love with the beautiful Miss Wharton too?' replied the girl called Amy.

'Is that their name? But it isn't Miss Wharton I am thinking of; it's her younger sister. Fancy, they have been used to riding their own horses, and now they walk to the City and back! She wants to stay at the Enterprise on Saturday, so they can't have very nice "diggings,"' replied her companion.

'It's not a bad place to spend a wet afternoon in; so, if you like, we will lunch there; it's just as comfortable as Bleak House,' replied Amy.

'Yes, but one gets tired of living in a crowd. Oh how I wish we could afford a cottage in the country!' said the younger girl.

'But we cannot, Eva; so let us try to be contented with our lot,' replied Amy.

By way of showing her content, Eva grumbled loudly at it to Vava. The four were sitting at the same table, having lunch, and she found only too willing a listener in Vava Wharton to sympathise with her.

'Cheer up, Eva; things might be worse. Here we are sitting on a wet and bitterly cold afternoon in a pleasant, warm room, in comfortable chairs, surrounded by newspapers, magazines, and fashion papers! What more could you have if you were a fashionable young lady?' inquired her chum Amy.

'I could have this room as my own, and money to spend on the fashions I look at, and somewhere to show them off better than a stuffy office or Bleak House,' retorted Eva.

'Bleak House! That is the name of one of Dickens's books!' exclaimed Vava.

'It is the name of a large hostel or boarding-house for ladies who earn their own living, where Eva and I live, and it is really quite comfortable, only that it is not home,' said Amy, and she looked sympathetically at Eva, who was only sixteen, and had begun early to work for her daily bread.

There was silence for a moment, and the four young faces looked as grave as if they had the cares of the world upon their shoulders.

Suddenly Eva broke out, 'I wouldn't mind if I had something different to look forward to; but to think of going on for years the same dull grind and back to the same crowd of girls, who can talk of nothing but their office or else roller-skating; and Amy does not approve of going out to amusements every evening.'

'We wanted to take a house, but it is too expensive, and the one we looked at was dreadfully dear, although it had no garden. Oh how I would love a house with a garden! Some of the girls at school have gardens, and even greenhouses, for they bring leaves and flowers to school for our painting and botany lessons, and yet they are not rich,' observed Vava.

'All houses are not dear. Girls! I have an idea; let's take a house between us—the four of us!' cried Eva suddenly.

Stella looked up, startled at this abrupt suggestion; but Eva's chum Amy, who was used to her ways, only smiled, and said jestingly, 'Where do you mean to take a house, and how would you furnish it?'

'In the suburbs; and as for furnishing, we could do that on the hire-system. It shall have a garden and a lawn and a tree—I must have a tree; it's so ideal to sit and have tea in the garden under a tree, or read a book in a canvas-chair on a summer's day,' replied Eva.

'I don't care for the hire-system, and houses with gardens and lawns and trees are not to be found in London. I am afraid we must wait until we are old ladies, and can retire on our savings and live in some little country village,' said Amy, laying her hand upon Eva's and smiling at her.

Possibly the conversation would have ended here but for Vava, and something that she said. 'But couldn't we have a little house in an unfashionable part? All the girls at school have houses or flats of their own; it would be so nice to have a home.'

'So we will have a home. Why shouldn't we? Lots of families live on two hundred pounds a year, and that would be a pound a week each. Why, the Smiths are a family of five, and they have only about two hundred, and they have a garden and an arbour covered with ivy and creepers and things!' cried Eva.

'Oh where is that?' asked Vava eagerly, her eyes shining.

'My dear Eva!' protested Amy, looking apologetically at Stella, who was very grave and silent.

'Well, what is the matter?' demanded Eva.

'You do talk such nonsense. How can four people, who are strangers to each other, suddenly take a house and live together? Why, we do not even know each other's names!' said Amy, laughing.

'My name is Eva Barnes, and this is my greatest and best friend, Amy Overall,' said Eva promptly; and then, turning to Vava, she added, 'Let's talk it over by ourselves; old people are always cautious,' and she and Vava began to talk in low tones. Presently Eva took out a pencil and note-book, and began making elaborate calculations.

The two 'elders' smiled at them. They were not more than twenty-one and

twenty-four respectively; but they let the younger ones whisper nonsense together, while they talked of books; and Stella found that Amy Overall had read the same sort of books that she had, which surprised her, for hers had been chosen for her by her literary father.

'My father was a professor at Cambridge, and that is why I have read these books,' explained Amy, delighted to find some one whose tastes were congenial; in fact, it is to be doubted which of the two was most pleased.

They were so interested in discussing a certain author that they took little notice of the other two. Every now and then a low laugh told them that the two younger girls were enjoying themselves as much as the 'old people,' as they called their elders.

'Now,' cried Eva, 'let us lay a statement of accounts before them!'

The elders stopped in their conversation, and looked at Eva and Vava, whose faces were flushed with excitement, and whose eyes were dancing as Stella had not seen Vava's dance since she left Lomore, not even on their motor drive.

Amy took the sheet of paper Eva handed her, saying, 'Eva is a great mathematician; she takes after her father.'

'Barnes! Did he write an arithmetic?' inquired Vava; and when Eva nodded, she added, 'Why, I use it at school!'

'What accounts have you been making out?' asked Stella in a friendly tone, for this last fact seemed a link between them as the daughters of literary men.

'Our new house and its expenses,' announced Vava.

Amy looked half-fearfully at Stella, for she thought she would be annoyed at the girl's persistence; but, to her surprise, Stella read the paper through with apparent interest.

'Rent, £34; taxes, £12; food, £90; firing and gas, £20; servant, £12; washing, £12, extras, £20—total, £200,' she read out.

'That's only the summary of it; here are the details. We have made out a menu for a week and washing for four people and household linen,' explained Eva.

'It is a step which requires consideration; we might not care for each other's company on closer acquaintance,' said Stella.

But Vava interrupted impulsively, 'We have arranged for that; we would have two sitting-rooms, and only come together when we liked; and, anyway, they couldn't be as disagreeable as our landlady. Fancy, she won't cook in the evenings, and she always wants to know if we are not going out to friends on Sunday, and it makes us feel as if we ought to go somewhere out of her way.'

Stella did not quite like Vava's frankness. Seeing which, Amy hastened to say, 'That was our experience in lodgings, and one of the reasons we gave them up. It is very difficult to know what to do; but at Bleak House we have not that difficulty. I should like you to see it. Would you'—here she hesitated and coloured—'would you and your sister give us the pleasure of your company to-morrow? We are so many that a few more make no difference, and we are encouraged to bring our friends.'

It would have been difficult to refuse an invitation so diffidently given; besides, Stella liked Amy Overall, and Vava's eyes were begging her to say 'Yes,' and she did so, and was rewarded by the evident pleasure which she had given every one.

'Stella, couldn't we do it, don't you think?' pleaded Vava on the way home.

'Take a house, do you mean? I don't know, Vava; we may some day—who knows?—but not yet awhile,' replied Stella, who was anxious not to damp her sister's delight in these castles in the air.

'If you only knew how horrid it is to hear the other girls talking of going home; they have all got homes but me,' said Vava wistfully.

Stella tried to comfort her, and began to talk of their visit next day, and of how they could get there after church, and Vava cheered up at the thought of a day with Eva, who was so little older than she that they got on very well together.

Amy meanwhile was taking Eva to task. 'You surely were not serious; and, if not, do you think it was kind to raise hopes and put ideas which can never be realised into that child's head?' she demanded severely.

'I was quite serious; it was a sudden inspiration, and, mark my words, it will be realised!' declared Eva.

'Not by me; I am not going to run into all sorts of expenses which a house always entails,' said Amy.

'Now, isn't that funny? It is always the unexpected that happens; one would have

expected the cautious Scotch Miss Wharton to be the one to make objections, whereas she is inclined to risk it—I could see that in the corner of her eye—and you are the timid one,' declared Eva.

'On the contrary, Miss Wharton was only too polite to crush you. When she says she's ready to take a house with us I shall certainly be ready to agree,' replied Amy Overall, feeling certain that she would not be asked to do so.

'All right; that's a promise of which I shall remind you before long, you will see,' said Eva; and then talked of the morrow and what they should do with their visitors.



CHAPTER X.

BLEAK HOUSE HOSTEL.

'What are we going to do with those two girls to-day, Amy?' demanded Eva at breakfast, which, being Sunday, they were having late.

'Entertain them,' responded Amy.

'Don't be tiresome; you know quite well what I mean. What are we to do to entertain them? They will get here at half-past twelve, after they have been to church. We can't go to church in the afternoon; besides, we don't know what kind of church they go to, and dinner can't last longer than a quarter to two, because the servants like to have the tables all cleared by two o'clock, and I suppose they won't go away till after tea at four o'clock,' argued Eva.

'I hope they won't go away until after supper. I want them to have a nice day; they are very lonely, Eva. You know what we felt like when we first came to town, and how we determined we would always be friendly to other lonely girls from the country, and I thought you liked the Misses Wharton so much that you wanted to live with them!' cried Amy Overall in surprise at this change of front.

'That's just it, I do want to live with them; at least I want to have a house to myself again.'

'A house to yourself! Is that your latest? That is more ridiculous than your last idea, and still less likely to come about,' said Amy.

'It is the same idea. I call it "to myself," with only three others in it, especially when I am part-owner; and the reason I don't want the Whartons to stay too long to-day is for fear that they should be bored, and find that we are not their sort, and not want to take a house with us after all,' explained Eva.

'Well, really, Eva, your way of looking at things does surprise me sometimes; and I hope you won't be angry, but it does not always seem to me to be quite straight.'

'What isn't quite straight?' demanded Eva, flushing up.

Amy was a little slow in expressing herself; but she said hesitatingly, 'I mean that it would be honest, in my opinion, to face facts, and if we were likely to bore each other to find it out before we entered upon a plan which would throw us together for a great many Sundays as well as other days.'

'That is quite a different thing. We shall not have to entertain each other for a whole day; we shall go our own ways, and read books, or write letters; but we can't ask the Misses Wharton to read books to-day, and one can't talk for hours together—at least I can't; perhaps you can, as you are so very righteous,' retorted Eva, who was annoyed.

'I thought we might go to a picture-gallery after dinner, and then come back for tea and a talk, and there is always some nice music here in the evening,' suggested Amy, taking no notice of Eva's last remark.

Eva recovered her temper as quickly as she lost it. 'That will be a good plan; but—they are Scotch, and I don't believe they allow music on Sundays,' she suddenly bethought herself.

'You are thinking of that story we read the other day. Those were strict people; I don't believe the Whartons are like that.' But she looked rather doubtful.

Eva smiled wickedly. 'So perhaps, after all, we shall have to talk all the time.'

'I don't think Miss Wharton and I will get tired of each other, even if such a dreadful thing happened as our being obliged to entertain each other for a few hours,' said Amy calmly.

But when the Whartons came it turned out that they had no objection to music nor to a picture-gallery, provided they had been to church first.

Vava and Eva paired off, and the latter began at once, 'Tell me, are you as sick of lodgings as ever?'

'Yes, of course; I should never like them. But why do you ask?' demanded Vava, who looked so pretty in her prettily made Sunday-frock that Eva was more than ever attracted to her.

'Because Amy and I have decided that we are quite ready if you two are,' said Eva.

Vava flushed with pleasure. 'Really? Then Miss Overall doesn't think it a mad

idea? Stella did not believe you were serious, or that Miss Overall would like it; but if she does I shouldn't wonder if Stella would agree to doing it. She said it might be possible some day; but not yet, of course.'

'Some day may mean years hence, when we are all dead, or too old to enjoy a garden of our own. Just fancy sowing flower-seeds and watching them growing every day, and having our own vegetables! We could have salad every evening in the summer, and lettuces freshly picked from a dear little bed!' urged Eva.

Vava listened with growing enthusiasm. 'It would be almost like home again. I have grown radishes in my little garden, because nursie liked them for tea. If only nursie were with us I should be quite happy, I think!' she exclaimed.

The two younger girls were in Eva's little bedroom, taking off Vava's outdoor things, a process which they had prolonged so as to talk confidentially together. Stella Wharton and Amy Overall, on the contrary, had long since gone down to the big drawing-room, where about thirty girls of various ages were sitting about, reading or talking.

It seemed to Stella, who was not used to crowds, that the babel was terrific, and Amy, seeing this, rose, saying, 'If you don't mind staying here alone for a few minutes I will ask the housekeeper to let us have a private sitting-room for an hour or so? We can talk better there.'

Amy had arranged for the private sitting-room, and was just going to tell Vava and Eva that there was no need for them to sit in a cold bedroom, when Eva appeared in the passage.

'I was just coming to you, Amy. I want to speak to you alone for a moment,' said Eva hurriedly, taking her friend's arm; and, turning back with her to the latter's room, she added, 'What do you think, Amy, the Whartons are quite ready to start housekeeping if only you will, and as they are cautious Scotch people it's sure to be all right!'

'Who told you that, Eva? You mean that Vava is quite ready, don't you? I can scarcely believe that Miss Wharton, who really seems a very thoughtful, serious person, has said she is ready to start a house with strangers. It seems incredible!' objected Amy, and she looked rather curiously at Eva.

'There's nothing so incredible in wanting to live in a house instead of horrid lodgings. They are miserable where they are, and jump at the thought of making

other arrangements, which they can only do if you chum with them. And, after all, what's all the fuss and caution about? What is there so very serious in taking a little house for a year? Of course we may get tired of it and each other, though I don't think that likely; but twelve months is not so long to put up with what we don't like, and, anyway, it will be great fun at first. What is your objection now?' demanded Eva, who poured out all this eloquence so rapidly and energetically as to overwhelm the slow-thinking Amy.

'It's—it's not such a light or easy matter, Eva. There are the weekly bills to be thought of, and the furnishing, and the rent, and a servant, and—oh! a hundred things,' wound up the elder girl, with knitted brows.

'The weekly bills won't come to more than we can pay weekly, and as for a servant—what do we want with one? We will each do our own room before we start, and we are out all day, and only sleep there, except on Saturday and Sunday; and then, among the four of us, surely we can manage a little house. We will lead the simple life; every one is talking about the simple life, and how one goes in for too many luxuries and is over-civilised, and we will just go back to primitive ways. Now, Amy, be a Christian and say "Yes." You are always telling me that one must be self-sacrificing in this world; sacrifice yourself, and make those two lonely girls happy, to say nothing of me, who am stifled in this crowded barracks of a place,' declared Eva.

Eva did not look very stifled, and in justice to the ladies' hostel it should be stated that it was not in the least crowded or stifling; this was a mere figure of speech on Eva's part, who, as will have been seen, was apt to turn things round to suit herself. She was only sixteen; very young to be thrown upon the world and her own resources. With the exception of Amy, she was unfortunately not under very good influences, and when she wanted to believe a thing was true she generally managed to do so, and though she would have scorned to tell a lie she made things appear to be what she wished them to be. At any rate, she managed to deceive both Vava and Amy, and make each of them believe that consent had been given on both sides; and, as unfortunately often happened, she succeeded in getting her own way.

However, for the moment there was no talk about future plans; it would not have been possible in the public dining-room, and almost immediately after early dinner the four went off to the Tate Gallery, and the talk turned upon pictures, and Eva noticed with satisfaction that the elders were getting on famously.

'Do you know what I have been thinking?' inquired Eva of Vava.

They were standing before a picture by Burne-Jones as she said this. Vava replied promptly, 'I don't know, unless it is that the ladies in this picture have all got the same mouths.'

'Oh the picture! I wasn't thinking about it at all; I don't care very much for art. Amy does, and she is always dragging me here with her, so that I know them all by heart, and am quite sick of them. No, what I was thinking was that those two are getting on A1, and that it's all providential!' announced Eva.

Vava looked puzzled for a minute, and then laughed as she said, 'You mean that it is providential that they like one another? Then, I suppose, it's providential that we get on together, or that any one ever likes any one else?'

'I mean that, as we want to live together, it's a good thing we suit each other,' replied Eva.

'Oh but that may not be for a long time; still, we can be friends, can't we?' asked Vava.

'Yes, but why need it be a long time? Your sister is quite ready; so is Amy'—— she began.

But Vava interrupted her in surprise. 'Stella quite ready! To take a house with you, do you mean? Oh is she really?'

'Why, of course she is! Didn't you tell me so?' cried Eva.

'I?' replied Vava, in such tones of astonishment that Eva coloured up.

'You certainly said that if Amy would agree your sister would, and that she thought it a good idea. And as Amy does agree——why, your sister will too,' she affirmed.

Eva had quite persuaded herself that the two elder girls were ready, and that it only needed some keeping up to the mark on her part to bring the new plan about.

Vava was quite silent for a time; she was very impulsive and outspoken, but she was also very straightforward, and somehow it struck her that Eva's speech was not so. In spite of her impulsiveness, she could on occasion hold her peace, and she did so now.

'Of course, if you've changed your mind, and don't care so much for me, now that you know me better, that ends the matter; we must go on living in our barracks, and you in your dirty lodgings!' Eva cried, vexed at Vava's silence.

Vava was half-inclined to be angry at Eva's plain speaking; but, after all, the lodgings were dirty, and it was she herself who had told Eva so, and, besides, it was rather flattering to be wanted as a house-mate. So she forgot her suspicion as to Eva's truthfulness, and answered heartily enough, 'I do want to live with you, and I am just as tired of our dirty lodgings as you can be of your hostel, which is ever so much nicer than where we live, if only there wasn't such a noise all the time with people talking all at the one time. And as for Stella, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea. She is not one to make up her mind in a hurry—we Scotch never are, I think; but I will try and persuade her.'

Eva said no more; privately she thought her own persuasion would be more powerful. They were now called by the other two to come with them, as the gallery was just closing.

'And I haven't seen half the pictures!' exclaimed Vava.

'Never mind; I will bring you again another day,' said Stella, smiling; and Vava thought she had not seen her look so bright and happy since they had left Lomore.

'We might make it our next Saturday treat,' agreed Vava.

'We had another plan for Saturday,' replied Stella, smiling again in a half-ashamed manner.

'Another treat? Are we going anywhere all together?' Vava inquired, looking from Stella to Amy.

'We are going house-hunting,' announced Amy, who looked pleased at the demonstration of delight the announcement called forth.

'House-hunting?' echoed Vava, while Eva gave a little cry of delight; then, having got over their surprise, the two younger girls began asking eager questions.

'We have not made our calculations yet; but we are going to have a council of war, or rather of peace, at the Enterprise Club next week to talk things over. At any rate, we can just go and look at some little houses in a suburb which Miss

Overall thinks possible,' Stella observed.

There was little else talked of till they parted; and Amy said after they were gone, 'I hope I have done right. Miss Wharton did not seem quite so ready when I spoke to her. I suppose upon reflection her Scotch caution came to the fore, and indeed I am half-frightened myself; but their gratitude at our being so friendly was reward enough for running a little risk, and we are not pledged to anything even now,' she wound up.

'Oh but you mustn't draw back; you are really doing a kind deed, and it will turn out splendidly, you will see!' cried Eva quickly.

Vava meanwhile walked home with her sister in the gayest of spirits, and yet a doubt would keep coming into her mind. Hadn't Eva rather managed them all, and hadn't she rather twisted what she (Vava) had said? Then the remembrance of Eva's affectionate parting made her ashamed of her doubts, and she banished them from her mind.

'Anyway, we sha'n't get tired of them, for we have spent a whole day doing nothing but talk to each other, and if you can do that you can spend your whole life with any one nearly; at any rate, you can live in the same house, especially when you are all out in separate parts all the day,' opined Vava.

'We can but try; and, at any rate, it is not settled, and I shall do nothing without consulting Mr. Stacey,' declared Stella as they said good-night to each other.



CHAPTER XI.

'THE RANK IS BUT THE GUINEA'S STAMP.'

'Hallo, Vava!' said a voice behind her, as Vava Wharton was on her way to school a few days after the Sunday she and her sister had spent at the ladies' hostel.

There was no doubt as to the speaker, for this was Doreen Hackney's invariable greeting, and, as usual, Vava turned and said pleasantly, 'Good-morning, Doreen.'

'What's the row—matter, I mean? You look down in the dumps. I say, are you moping for the country? You don't seem to be half the girl you were when you first came; you don't make any jokes, and when I meet you in the morning you have a face as long as a fiddle,' remarked Doreen in her loud, cheerful tones.

'I was only thinking. I didn't know my face was long. We are thinking of moving—into a house, my sister and I—and I was thinking about that, and I suppose it made me look grave,' explained Vava.

'What on earth is there to be grave about in that? You haven't got anything to do with the moving, have you? We moved last year, and it didn't make me grave till mother said I'd got to burn some of what she called my "rubbish." I think it's rather fun moving; you have all new wall-papers and a new garden, and it makes a change. Where are you going to move to?' inquired Doreen.

'Oh I don't know; we haven't got a house yet. I believe we are going to look at one in Blackstead,' said Vava.

'Blackstead! That's where we live. There are some nice houses there; cheap too, because it is not a fashionable suburb. I hope you will come there, because then you and I can come to school together—that is, if your sister would not mind. Mother says I am not to push myself into your society, because you are a lady; and I'm very rough, I know. Mother's always telling me about my manners; she says I talk so loud and laugh so loud. I wish you would tell me about it when I do; you talk so soft and ladylike,' observed Doreen.

Vava laughed. 'I! Why, the girls couldn't understand me when I first came,' she

protested.

'Oh well, there were some words you used that we'd never heard before, but I like it now. I say, if you do move our way I wish you'd let me help,' Doreen said very earnestly, for she concluded that it was the moving which was causing Vava to look so worried.

'Thank you,' said Vava, and laughed.

'It won't be so bad, you know; the men move so cleverly now, mother says; you start in the morning, and in the evening you are all to rights. I dare say when you get back from school you'll find it quite shipshape, and even if you're not you can sleep the night at our place; so don't you worry about that,' said Doreen.

'It's not that at all; I don't care if we are not shipshape for a week; it's the girls we are going to take a house with that are worrying me—if I am worrying, as you say,' replied Vava.

Then Vava told her the story of their plan, and finished up by saying, 'I don't quite like Eva—at least I can't help liking her, because she is so lively and such fun to talk to, and she has been awfully nice to us; but I feel as if I can't quite believe in her somehow. And if we are going to live together we shall have to be friends.'

Doreen whistled, and then seeing that Vava looked a little put out at her schoolfellow's manners, and the attention they attracted in the street, she apologised, saying in a lower tone, 'Beg your pardon, but I'm sorry for what you tell me, because there's nothing so horrid as to have to do with any one that is not quite straight. Why don't you believe in her? Doesn't she tell the truth?'

'I—I don't know; I don't like to say anything against her, because she is very nice to me, and seems to like me, and she has never told me a real story. But it's the things she says, they make me feel uncomfortable. And yet I do so want to live in a house again, and we can only do it if we chum with them!'

'Well, you needn't see much of her even if you live in the same house; you'll be out all day, and so will she, and you will have your lessons and practising in the evenings. After all, they're only new friends; they can't expect you to live as if you were one family, and—and you know I'm straight—if you do come to Blackstead we might do our lessons together?' suggested Doreen, by way of comforting Vava.

But, as it happened, it had not quite the desired effect; for, much though Vava liked Doreen, she remembered her sister's resolution that if they could not have friends of their own class they would have none; and as she declined to know the Montague Joneses she would certainly not have anything to do with the Hackneys. However, that was not a thing she could say to Doreen; and, as she did not want to throw cold water on her kindness, she said, 'Thank you, you are kind, and of course you are straight, and I am very glad you are my chum, especially in school; out of school Stella is my chum.'

'Yes, of course, and a jolly good one too,' said Doreen heartily; and if she guessed that Vava meant that they would *not* see much of each other out of school, she did not show it, but observed, 'And you know, even if that Eva is not always quite square in her way of looking at things, you can do her good.'

'Miss Briggs said the other day that "evil communications corrupt good manners," and that if a girl's conversation made us feel uncomfortable, or feel that we should not like our parents to hear it, we were to shun her as we should the plague,' observed Vava.

'I know she did, but I don't agree with her,' remarked Doreen calmly.

Vava looked at Doreen in astonishment. She often questioned her sister's authority, but not Miss Briggs's, who was a very clever young mistress. 'Do you mean that if a girl isn't nice you don't care?' she asked.

'No, I mean that you ought to make her shut up. Sometimes a girl talks rot because she is silly; but you can soon stop her, and if one were to avoid every one who did or said anything wrong, why one might as well live in a desert island. Look at Belle Reed! You couldn't believe a word that girl said when she first came to our school; but she soon dropped it when she found we couldn't stand liars.'

Doreen had got interested in what she was saying, and unconsciously raised her voice, and one of the mistresses who happened to pass at the moment turned and looked with disapproval at her. She then glanced at her companion, and looked still more displeased.

'That is not very nice language for the street, Doreen,' she said severely.

'Bother! That was Miss Briggs! Why need she have passed at that particular minute?' observed the girl.

'Why need you talk so loudly?' remarked Vava. Then they both passed into school, and thought no more about it.

But next morning at breakfast Stella received a letter which seemed to annoy her a good deal, and she said to Vava, 'I hear you have made friends with an undesirable girl at school.'

'I suppose you mean Doreen; but why should you say you "hear" it? There's no need for you to go to other people to hear what I do, or what friends I have; I always tell you what happens at school, and I thought you liked Doreen Hackney. Of course I know she is not very ladylike outwardly, but she is agreeable,' said Vava, championing her friend rather hotly.

'Doreen Hackney? Is that the girl I spoke to the other day?' asked Stella, referring to the letter and looking puzzled.

'Yes, that is her name. Who has been writing against her to you? Why can't people mind their own business?' cried Vava.

'Vava, do not speak so rudely, or I shall think what I am told is true. It is Miss Briggs, who says she is not an improving companion for you, and that her language is very vulgar. But I can't believe you could learn harm from that girl; she has such a nice, open face,' said Stella.

'So she has. All she said was that she couldn't stand liars, and I suppose that shocked Miss Briggs; but I believe in calling a spade a spade,' announced Vava.

'You are not to call people liars, and you had better tell Doreen that I object to such strong language; there is no need for it. It is quite enough to say "an untruth." I hope Doreen was not calling any one names?' inquired Stella.

'No, only people in general,' said Vava.

Stella laughed. 'Well, tell her not to do so in future.' But she did not say anything about her being an undesirable friend for Vava, to the latter's relief. Stella opened her next letter, which happened to be from the house-agent at Blackstead, and this interested her so much that she forgot about Doreen and her strong language.

'There is a house at Blackstead which sounds ideal, Vava. Listen: "Four bedrooms, three reception-rooms, kitchen, bath (h. and c.), and garden with fruit-trees—forty pounds, but perhaps less to a good tenant, as the landlord lives next door and is very particular about his neighbours, and has refused good 'lets'

already,'" Stella read out.

She was the least busy of the four, and the only one with capital, so it had been decided that she should do the correspondence, and by Mr. Stacey's advice she was to take the house in her own name, as 'you can then get rid of your new acquaintances if you wish, and you will be responsible for the rent, or rather I will, which your landlord will prefer, as I hold your securities.'

'Do you know, Stella, I have come to the conclusion that people never do what you expect them to do; anyway, you and Mr. Stacey don't,' announced Vava when she heard Mr. Stacey's advice.

'I don't? What have I done or not done that you expected?' said Stella, amused at Vava's moralising, though she understood and agreed with her surprise at Mr. Stacey's ready approval of their taking a small house, instead of remaining in lodgings; it did not seem like his usual caution nor the advice he gave them before they left Lomere.

'You don't disapprove of Doreen, though she is not a lady and a little rough sometimes and loud in her way of speaking in the street, so that I feel ashamed at the attention she attracts, though I like her most awfully; and yet you don't like the Montague Joneses, who behave quite like a lady and gentleman; and now Mr. Stacey, who was so horrid, telling us we must go into poky lodgings and be saving, quite approves of our taking a house with some people we don't know very well! It's rather funny of him, but I believe I know the reason,' announced Vava, nodding her head.

Stella thought she knew too, but her guess was a different one to Vava's. She imagined that her remarks about her younger sister's flagging health and spirits influenced the old lawyer, as well as the fact at which he hinted that their income would be a little larger than he anticipated, thanks to the sum paid for the hire of their furniture and a rise in some shares. Whereas Vava had an idea that the Montague Joneses were somehow at the bottom of his change of front; but neither imparted her opinion to the other, and Stella did not ask Vava for hers, because she was occupied with thoughts of the new scheme.

The Montague Joneses had called on a wet Saturday afternoon, having chosen that time as very likely to find them at home; but the Misses Wharton were at the Enterprise Club, and came home to find their visitors' cards.

'Such a nice lady and gentleman and such a splendid car; they are grand friends

for you to have,' the landlady said.

Stella made no reply, but passed on to her own little sitting-room.

Vava looked wistfully at Stella, but the latter did not catch the look, or she might have spoken otherwise. 'We must leave cards in return; but I shall not go on their "At Home" day,' she said.

Vava did not argue. She had known they were going to call; but if Stella had made up her mind it was no use arguing, and the thought of the ideal house, with a garden and fruit-trees, was consoling her for many things. Besides, old Mr. Montague Jones had told her on one of their expeditions while coming south that he meant to be their friend by hook or by crook, sooner or later. 'And what Monty Jones means comes to pass, as most people have found, and as you will find,' he had said as he patted Vava's arm kindly; and Vava had faith in the old man's word.

However, there was no chance of their being friends at present, as she saw, for she and Stella duly called on the wrong day, and Mrs. Jones was, according to the gorgeous footman who opened the door, 'not at home,' at which news Stella smiled in a satisfied way, and remarked, 'We have done our duty, and that ends the matter!'

It did not end the matter, as will be seen; but it was some time, and after other events had taken place, before the Whartons met their kind friends again.

CHAPTER XII.

'SAVE.'

'I have made such a wonderful discovery,' observed Eva to Stella Wharton, as she sat with the Wharton sisters and Amy Overall at the little table which was now left by common consent for these four friends at the Enterprise Club.

Miss Wharton rather liked Eva, who was bright and amusing, and her frank liking for the sisters flattered the lonely Scotch girl. Moreover, Stella was not so good a judge of character as her younger sister, and did not notice a want of candour in the girl. So she smiled and said pleasantly, 'Well, what is this wonderful discovery?'

'It is a motto. Vava says they have a special motto each term at her school, and I found a motto for our new house, and it is formed by our four names,' explained Eva.

The other three all looked interested, and Vava asked, 'How do you mean? By jumbling all the letters up? Because "Wharton, Overall, Barnes" does not make much sense.'

'No, but we might get something out of those names, such as "Union over all ills," or something of that kind. Let's try and work it out!' exclaimed Eva, whose mind turned easily from one subject to another. In a moment she had her notebook open, and was setting down all the letters of Wharton and Barnes to try and make suitable words out of them.

But the other stopped her, and Amy said, 'Let us hear your motto first, Eva; we have not too much time to waste, and, after all, a motto is not a very important thing.'

'Oh my motto—I forgot; *it* is a very important thing—it is "Save,"' she answered.

This remark was received with silence, and then the elder Miss Wharton said, with hesitation, 'I don't quite understand. Save whom or what?'

'Save money,' replied Eva.

'That's all very well as a precept; but what has that to do with our names, and how did you make that out of them?' demanded Amy.

'It's a very good motto; but never mind about it. I have got a better one; it is "Live and let live,"' put in Vava hastily.

Stella looked reprovingly at her sister, and said with grave politeness, 'I don't know that it is better; but Miss Barnes was going to explain to us how she got our names down to make "Save." That is a result of a mathematical mind; perhaps she can reduce even names to their lowest common denominator.' Stella's strong point was not mathematics, nor indeed was she very quick at any subject; though her knowledge was solid and reliable on the subjects she had studied.

'It's easy enough—S A V E, the initials of Stella, Amy, Vava, Eva,' said Eva airily.

Stella coloured, but said nothing. Amy, after looking at her, said, 'How absurd you are, Eva! Besides, you should not take liberties with other people's names.'

Then, seeing that Eva looked very crestfallen, Stella repented her of the proud reserve which had made her resent this same liberty, and said, 'It may be a good omen; and, after all, it is my motto for the present.'

Vava looked relieved, and remarked, 'It's funny that you are the first to "save" or in "Save."'

'I wish you would all begin to save time,' remonstrated Amy. 'We have so much to talk over and arrange, and we have only these meetings at the club for the purpose.'

So the four young heads drew closer together as they talked over ways and means, and argued and calculated, till a hasty movement by Eva, who was the most enthusiastic of the four, was followed by a loud clatter on the floor, which made them all start.

'I'm sorry; it's only my frying-pan,' she said, as she dived under the table and brought out a parcel, off which the brown paper had fallen, disclosing to view a large iron frying-pan.

Stella opened her beautiful eyes wide as she looked at it in wonder. Amy only smiled; but Vava, impulsive as usual, exclaimed, 'What are you doing with that

old frying-pan? Do you have to cook your own dinner in your office?

'I should think not, indeed! I should like to see our boss's face if we started making smells like that; besides, we don't need to; we get very good lunches at this club,' cried Eva, trying to pack the despised frying-pan up again in the paper; a futile attempt, as the wrapping was all torn.

'Then what on earth are you carrying such a thing about with you for?' demanded Amy, looking half-annoyed and half-amused.

'I brought it to show you all; it is for the new house!' she exclaimed triumphantly.

'Which we have not got yet,' put in Amy.

'But it's old—old and dirty,' objected Vava, who had been looking at it with disgust.

'That's only rust; it will clean off. I got it for threepence at an East-End market; it is a tremendous bargain, and is the beginning of our "save"—pots and pans are a most expensive item in house-furnishing; and I am going to undertake that part of it myself, and get one article each day. There was a splendid big iron kettle, with a hole in it, for sixpence'——she said.

But a chorus of laughter stopped her in her list of bargains.

'I don't think I care about eating things fried in a pan coming from an East-End market,' remarked Vava.

'And I don't see much good in a kettle with a hole in it,' said Stella; but instead of being shocked, as Vava evidently was, she seemed rather amused.

'It can easily be mended with solder, and sixpence is dirt-cheap for a large iron kettle,' observed Eva.

'I should call it "cheap dirt," if you will excuse the bad joke; and, seriously, Eva, it is very foolish spending your money on such rubbish; shillings soon run away in that manner, and we want all our spare shillings just now,' protested Amy Overall.

'You are an ungrateful set,' said Eva; but she put the frying-pan out of sight, and listened seriously while the two elder girls talked over the different houses proposed, and Miss Wharton said finally, 'The only one that really suits is this one at Heather Road, Blackstead.'

'Then let us go there first,' agreed Amy.

'I expect the name attracted you, Miss Wharton,' said Eva, with a twinkle in her eye.

Stella laughed. 'It is an attractive name to us; but I am not so foolish as that, I hope; and it has fruit-trees in the garden, which do attract me, and I thought would attract you,' she replied.

'So they do, and it sounds too good to be true. Forty pounds, and the man would come down to thirty-eight. Let's go there on Saturday,' agreed Eva.

'There is one thing that I wanted to say,' observed Stella, looking a little uncomfortable, 'and that is, that I—I mean we—would rather have a very little furniture at first, and get it by degrees. We only need a bed and a washstand in our bedroom, and we have only enough money to furnish a sitting-room and half what is necessary for the kitchen and hall.'

'Oh but you need not worry about that. We can furnish on the hire-system; they will let you have any amount!' cried Eva.

'I would rather not,' persisted Stella.

Amy looked grave. 'I don't see how we are to manage without hiring, and I don't think our landlord would feel satisfied if we had no furniture to speak of, and I have only ten pounds to spend, and Eva has less, I believe.'

'I should think that the landlord would be better satisfied if we did not run into debt,' said Stella.

'I'd sooner go to a workhouse than live in a room with only a bed and a washstand! Where would you hang your clothes or keep your linen? Why, it would not be a home at all,' protested Eva.

'Of course I did not mean to dictate to you,' said Stella hastily; 'but Vava and I will be quite satisfied with a comfortable sitting-room, and we shall receive the landlord there, not in our bedroom,' she added with a smile.

'That is true, and as long as we have pretty curtains and blinds there is no need to furnish completely at once; besides, we have nearly two months to quarter-day, and we can save a few pounds if we are very economical,' agreed Amy.

'We will save in advance,' agreed Eva; but on the way home she observed to her

friend Amy, 'Those two Wharton girls are as narrow-minded as possible, and I am going to have a proper suite in my room, whatever they say; I should never feel comfortable unless I had looked at myself in a long glass before I went out.'

'I think they are right, and I shall not get anything I cannot pay for,' announced Amy.

'Well! you are easily led; but you won't lead me, for I am not going to be the talk of the neighbours because we have no decent furniture. I shall get a handsome satinwood bedroom suite, and that will give a tone to the place at any rate,' said Eva.

Amy laughed, but did not try to turn the girl, who, in spite of being only sixteen years old, was very determined in her opinions; and as unfortunately she was an orphan and independent of every one, it was not easy to control her, and her friend had always found it better to leave her alone until she had cooled down a little in her enthusiasm for anything, and then reason with her, and this she hoped to do now. So no more was said about buying furniture, about which it would be folly to think until the house had been taken and they knew the size of the rooms and other details.

The next day, when Vava left her sister at the usual point in the City, she saw Doreen Hackney coming up out of the Metropolitan Station. She came up by the train arriving at 9.20, and as the Whartons were very punctual, and arrived at this time, they almost invariably met her; but this morning, although she was almost certain Doreen had seen her, the latter walked on without turning her head.

But Vava knew Doreen too well to believe she did not wish to see her, and ran after her. 'Doreen! Doreen! wait a minute!' she panted. At the sound of her voice, Doreen stopped and apologised for having made her run. 'Are you blind? Didn't you see me when you came out of the station?' cried Vava.

Doreen gave her a very funny look. 'Yes-s,' she said hesitatingly; and then, seeing Vava's look of astonishment, she added lamely, 'I was in a hurry to get to school.'

'How absurd; we have plenty of time, and I want to tell you something. We are perhaps going to live at Blackstead, for we have heard of a lovely little house there with a garden and fruit-trees—at least, so the agent says, though Stella says it may only be a tiny apple-tree, with no apples on it, because they always exaggerate in advertisements,' observed Vava.

'Oh but there are fruit-trees—apples and pears and plums!' exclaimed Doreen, and then stopped abruptly.

'Are there such gardens in London suburbs? But there may not be in this one. Do you know the part—it is Heather Road, Blackstead?'

'Oh yes, I know it,' said Doreen in rather a reserved tone.

Vava had been so full of her news that she had not noticed Doreen's manner, or rather had put it down to discomfort at having been rude in not stopping for her; but it struck her at last that her friend was not like herself, and she asked suddenly, 'What is the matter, Doreen?'

'Nothing—nothing,' said Doreen hastily.

'Then what do you know about the house? Isn't it in a nice part?' inquired Vava, as a thought struck her.

'Oh yes, the part is all right; it's very open; you will like it very much if you come, and I do hope you will,' said Doreen so cordially that Vava was relieved.

'I hope we shall, then. Is it very far from you?' inquired Vava.

No; it's—it's quite near. But, you know, in London one need not know one's next-door neighbour unless one likes. We never said anything more than "Good-morning!" to the people we lived next door to for three years. Mother is not one of those who is always talking over the wall to her neighbour; so you need not be afraid of that,' observed Doreen.

'But we don't mind knowing our next-door neighbour; in fact, we shall know him, because he is our landlord, and a very honest, nice man, the agent says; not educated'——

'Vava, was that the bell?' interrupted Doreen abruptly.

Doreen's manners were certainly very bad, and Vava said severely, 'You are rude, Doreen, and if I did not know you I should think you took no interest in our new house.'

'I do, and I hope very much you will come to Heather Road; I know you will like it and be happy there.'

'Where do you live? We may pass your house to-morrow, because we are going

to Heather Road to look at this house, and I will look out for you in case you are at the window,' said Vava.

To Vava's astonishment, Doreen did not answer her, but appeared not to have heard, and called out in her loud way to two girls who were on the other side of the road. It took a good deal to offend Vava, but this morning she felt decidedly ruffled; and as she did not particularly care for the new-comers, she walked on alone in a slightly aggrieved mood.

But Doreen seemed quite unconscious of having given offence in the morning, and was more attentive and friendly than usual to Vava as they walked down the road after school. When she said good-bye to her at the Metropolitan Station she called after her, 'I say, I do hope you'll come to Heather Road; you'll like it awfully, I know.'

But when Vava turned round to reply, no Doreen was to be seen; she had disappeared into the station. Vava, recounting the tale to her sister, observed, 'She has such bad manners, but she doesn't mean it.'

'Perhaps she had to run to catch her train?' suggested Stella.

'Oh no, she hadn't; she always has ten minutes to wait. She generally waits and tries to make me loiter and talk to her; but to-day she didn't, and she never told me where she lives, though she knew that I wanted to look out for her house to-morrow. I was just going to ask her how far it was from Heather Road when off she went. I almost think she must be ashamed of her home, and doesn't want me to know where it is,' declared Vava.

'Then you had better not ask her again,' said Stella.

Whether this was true or not will be seen in the next chapter, when the four young house-hunters went to look at No. 2 Heather Road.



CHAPTER XIII.

YOUNG HOUSE-HUNTERS.

It had become a custom that Vava should accompany her sister to the City on Saturdays and sit in the housekeeper's room, and on these occasions Mr. James would drop into Mrs. Ryan's room on some pretext or another, and ask how she was getting on at school or how she liked London.

This morning she had her algebra to do, and was puzzling over a difficult problem, for mathematics was not her strong point, when the junior partner appeared, and seeing her occupation, exclaimed, 'Well, Miss Vava, how are you? And how's the algebra getting on?'

'I'm quite well, thank you, Mr. Jones; but my algebra isn't.'

'I'm quite well, thank you, Mr. Jones; but my algebra isn't. Miss Courteney says I have not a mathematical brain, and I don't know how I am to get one,' replied Vava.

'I shouldn't bother about a mathematical brain. I don't see what women want with mathematics myself; but as for that problem, I'll show you how to do it,' said the good-natured young man, sitting down beside her and patiently explaining the difficulty.

'Thank you ever so much. I wish you taught me mathematics—by myself, I mean. Miss Courteney is a very good teacher; but, you see, she has thirty of us, so she can't explain each sum to each girl as you have explained this to me. Besides, the others don't seem to want so much explanation as I do,' cried Vava, delighted at understanding at last a difficult rule.

'Is that so? I will teach you, if you like to bring your work to me, for half-an-

hour on Saturdays; I'm generally slack the first half-hour after I have given your sister her letters,' he said.

'Oh I wish I could; but I don't know if Stella will let me, she's so'——Vava stopped suddenly.

'So what?' demanded Mr. Jones, laughing.

'So afraid of my troubling you, and she does not like my making friends with people,' explained the girl; and then, to change the conversation, she told about the new house they were going to see.'

'I should think it would be a very good plan, and a great deal more comfortable than your present lodgings,' said Mr. Jones promptly.

'How do you know?' asked Vava, opening her eyes, for Mr. Jones had never been to their lodgings, and she had never mentioned them to him, for Stella had forbidden her to speak about them or complain of discomforts.

'Lodgings are mostly uncomfortable,' said Mr. Jones, 'and Blackstead is a very healthy suburb.'

Here Vava looked more astonished still.

'How did you know it was Blackstead?' she cried, for she had not mentioned that either.

'Didn't you tell me? Oh well, some one did, and I suppose it is no secret, is it?' he replied, looking a little annoyed.

'Oh no; only I wondered how you knew the name,' said Vava, and she took no more notice of his knowledge, and chattered on gaily about the new house, adding, 'Stella and I are not going to get anything on the hire-system; she says she could not enjoy sitting in an arm-chair that had not been paid for.'

Mr. Jones nodded approval. 'That's quite right, and just what I should expect from your sister. It's not a good way of setting up house; save first and furnish afterwards is my motto. I have known many cases of young householders starting in this way and getting deeper and deeper into debt as expenses increased. But I think it is a good move, and will not be much more expensive; only you must have some elderly person to look after you. If I may give a piece of advice, it is to get *no furniture* yet.'

'Stella says she will only get simple, light furniture, because we have our own furniture at home, only it is too big to bring down, and some horrid people have it now.'

Mr. James looked very grave. 'Why do you call them horrid? Have they *spoilt* the furniture, or are they horrid themselves?' he demanded.

'Oh no; they are not really horrid, and they have not used the furniture yet. They are only horrid because they have taken our house from us, and Stella says that's not their fault. But I don't agree with her; I call it mean to take advantage of another person's not being business-like to win his property from him, and that's how my father lost his.'

Mr. Jones did not reply to these remarks, and Vava, who liked to be agreed with, persisted, 'Don't you think it was rather a mean thing to do?'

'I don't know all the facts of the case; but I hope it was a fair and square deal, and I should think it was,' he replied at last; but he did not seem to want to talk about it, and after finishing the lesson he got up and went away.

But Stella was horrified when Vava repeated this conversation to her. 'How many times am I to tell you not to talk of our private concerns to strangers?' she exclaimed.

'Well, you must have been talking about them yourself, or how did Mr. Jones know we were going to take a house at Blackstead?' retorted Vava.

'You must have mentioned the name yourself, and you ought not to have done so. I certainly never did; besides, we are going to view a house, not take it,' corrected her sister.

'As it happens, I could not remember the name, and that's why I was so surprised when Mr. Jones said it,' observed Vava.

Stella was thoughtful for a moment, and then she said, 'I don't know who can have told him, for only Mr. Stacey knows, unless he heard it from some one at your school. He is a governor, and sometimes goes there, and I suppose asked about you, and heard so.'

'I never thought of that; of course that's it!' cried Vava; and then they met the other two and lunched together.

'Have some pepper?' said Eva suddenly, and produced a quaint little pepper-pot from her bag.

'Is this another piece of furniture?' demanded Stella, smiling.

'Yes, it cost a halfpenny,' said Eva.

'It looks it,' said Amy severely.

'It will have to go into the kitchen; I won't eat out of it,' declared Vava, pushing it away with pretended scorn.

'People don't eat out of pepper-pots,' remarked Eva, shaking some on to her plate.

'It's full! Did you get the pepper and all for a halfpenny?' they cried.

But Eva shook the pepper steadily out till her plate was covered and the other three were sneezing. 'You seem to have colds,' she observed at last.

'Eva, you are a perfect plague with your purchases,' said Amy, laughing.

'I got it at a penny bazaar—two for a penny; here is the other,' said Eva, producing a second, and preparing to empty it.

But Vava made a dart at it, and after a struggle secured it. 'No more of that, thank you,' she declared.

'You need not have excited yourself; it's empty,' said Eva.

Amy pushed her chair back. 'If you have finished, Miss Wharton, I think we had better start. I know what Eva is like when she gets into one of these moods, and she is better when she is moving and her mind occupied.'

As Stella had finished, she willingly agreed to set off, and they were soon in the train for Blackstead and on their way to No. 2 Heather Road.

'Oh Stella, do let's live here! It feels so fresh, and the trees are beginning to bud, and these are quite nice gardens!' cried Vava.

'We will see. The house may be damp or very small and dark, or quite unsuitable,' said Stella cautiously.

But when they came to the semi-detached villa it was none of these things, but a

pretty bow-windowed house, with a nice little garden in front, and there was a very pretty garden next door, where they knocked and asked for the key, which was handed to them by a maid, who said, 'The master will be round in ten minutes to see if you like the place.'

'By the way, I don't know the name of the landlord,' said Stella, as she took the key and walked off with the others.

'That's awkward. Wasn't it on the order to view?' inquired Amy.

Stella laughed guiltily. 'I believe it was; but, to tell the truth, I did not look. It was very unbusiness-like of me. However, we shall know if it comes to anything.'

'But we sha'n't know what to call him,' said Eva.

'It doesn't matter. Let's go over the house—it looks lovely to me.—Oh Stella, there is a tiny lawn, and a tree in the middle, and fruit-trees round the sides, and an arbour with a little table in it. Oh we must take this house; I should love to live here!' cried Vava with enthusiasm.

'You can't live in the arbour; let us go and look at the house,' said Stella; but Vava and Eva had opened the back-door, which led into the garden, and their voices were heard exclaiming in delight as they found primrose and violet plants and an early snowdrop, and fruit-trees which might be apples or pears or plums.

From the next-door drawing-room window a girl watched them, but kept well behind the curtain. 'They like it, mother; I believe they will take it,' she said to some one within the room.

'I hope they will; they will be very nice, quiet neighbours; but, mind, I will not have you running in and out and intruding upon them.'

Meanwhile Stella and Amy were looking over the house, and they found a large bedroom, three smaller ones, a nice bathroom, and two sitting-rooms, one looking on the garden and one on the road, and a kitchen, 'which is almost the pleasantest room in the house,' said Stella.

'Yes, and it is all on two floors. I do hope the landlord will agree to our taking it together,' said Amy.

At that moment the landlord rang the front-door bell, and the two girls who went

to meet him were agreeably surprised to see such a fine, dignified man.

After some talk, the man said, 'I fancy you do not know who I am?'

'No-o, I forgot to read your name,' Stella admitted.

'And my daughter did not tell you either, for some foolish reason. My name is Hackney,' said the man.

But Stella looked puzzled. 'Your daughter? Do I know her?' Then a light dawned upon her. 'Is Doreen Hackney your daughter? I had forgotten her name. That is very nice for Vava, as they are great friends at school.'

Amy was surprised to see the pleased and relieved look on Mr. Hackney's face. 'So Doreen says, and I hope we may come to terms. Your lawyer seemed satisfied. I suppose you know he wrote to me? I can only say I will do all I can; and now, if you will accept a cup of tea my wife will be honoured.'

Stella did not know Mr. Stacey had written, but accepted the invitation very simply. She liked this simple, straightforward man, and called the two girls in from the garden to come to tea at the landlord's.

'Mrs. Hackney has kindly asked us to have tea with her,' she said; but she had no time to say more, for they were at the house, and Mr. Hackney took them into the drawing-room, where they found Mrs. Hackney and Doreen.

'Doreen!' cried Vava, and stood still in astonishment, and then, as Doreen came forward, she added mischievously, 'Please, Stella, I don't think we had better stay, as Doreen does not approve of knowing her next-door neighbour.'

Mrs. Hackney laughed; and though Stella was a little shocked at Vava's want of manners, she smiled at sight of the two girls' pleasure and the amount they had to say to each other.

'Doreen is an only child, and was very delicate, though she looks strong now, and we sent her to a farm for a couple of years, where she has learnt rough ways. It has been a great thing for her your sister making friends with her; but it must just go as far as you wish out of school,' said Doreen's mother.

'It may go as far as you like; I could not wish for a nicer companion for Vava,' said Stella.

And Vava heard her with surprise. 'You are a naughty girl, Doreen, and you

annoyed me very much yesterday; and now I should think you have learnt that honesty is the best policy,' she said to her friend.

'I was so dreadfully afraid your sister would not come if she knew,' said Doreen.

'Then what would have been the use of her coming, only to refuse when she did know?' inquired Vava with some reason.

'Oh I was sure if she once saw the house and garden she would take it, because it is such a nice one!' cried Doreen.

Stella only smiled, but Vava whispered, 'I'm sure we shall come here. Stella never speaks until she is quite certain of a thing, and our landlord approves.'

And then, after a very dainty tea out of a silver teapot and fine porcelain, the four turned homeward, talking eagerly about 'our new home,' as they called it.

Stella Wharton and Amy Overall sat leaning back in opposite corners of the carriage, smiling at the grand plans of the two younger girls, who were arranging the rooms and furnishing them with ideal furniture, which changed every few minutes, as did the wall-papers, except Eva's bedroom, which always had a paper covered with roses. 'I have always dreamt of living in a cottage covered with roses; but, till I do, I am going to make shift with a bedroom covered with rose-pink roses climbing about everywhere in large bunches tied up with blue ribbons,' she affirmed.

'Roses don't climb about tied up with ribbons,' remonstrated Vava, and then they all laughed at Eva's mistake.

'Oh well, I meant hanging about; I have seen papers like that, all pink roses and blue ribbons, and longed to have one; and now that I can choose my own paper that's what I'm going to have.—And oh, Miss Wharton, do have a crimson hall; it makes you feel warm the minute you get into a house!' cried Eva.

'And what about summer—you want to feel cool then? I think a green paper would be best,' argued Vava, and in discussing the merits of the different colours the journey was soon at an end, and the four, as they often did, wound up the evening together at Bleak House, where the matron generally arranged a musical or card evening for the girls who boarded with her.

CHAPTER XIV.

OFF TO A HOME AGAIN.

The mystery of Doreen's behaviour being cleared up, the two Whartons thought no more of Mr. James and his acquaintance with their movements. But a week later, when the little house was practically taken, Miss Wharton had a letter from Mr. Stacey which made her think that 'people' did interest themselves in her private affairs, and mingled with her gratitude was a feeling of resentment.

However, she read the letter to Vava, who by no means shared this resentment. 'Sending us some surplus furniture which is not wanted up there, and will nearly furnish our little house, is he? That's the Montague Joneses, you may be sure, Stella. How nice and thoughtful of them! I wonder if Mr. James Jones is any relation of theirs?'

Now this thought had come into Stella's mind too; but she replied, 'I don't think so. He would probably have mentioned it, and been rather proud of the fact that some of his family owned Lomore.'

'I don't believe he would mention it; he is too much of a gentleman,' maintained Vava stoutly.

'Mr. James Jones?' questioned Stella, lifting her eyebrows at this championship.

'Yes, and I want to know if he may teach me algebra?' continued Vava.

Stella, as has been said, was a slow thinker, and the junior partner as a mathematical master was a novel and strange idea which she did not take in at once. 'I don't understand. How can Mr. Jones teach you algebra?' she inquired at length.

'Quite well; he explained a difficult rule to me in about ten minutes last Saturday,' said Vava.

'You surely don't imagine that Mr. Jones has time to teach you mathematics in office hours? And he certainly can't teach you out of them,' objected Stella.

'He has plenty of time; he says he's always slack on Saturday mornings after he

has given you the letters, and he will teach me for half-an-hour if you will let him,' explained Vava.

Miss Wharton did not like the idea somehow. She did not want to be under an obligation to her employer; nor did she like to own to herself, far less to Vava, that the reason of her objection was a feeling that it was 'because he thought she was pretty.' However, as she could not give this reason, and had no other, she said reluctantly, 'It is very kind of Mr. Jones, but you must not take advantage of his good-nature; you must only come occasionally, not every Saturday.' Stella consoled herself with the thought that when they were in their new house Vava would no longer want to come to the City with her, but would prefer to stay with Doreen Hackney. Again it occurred to her to wonder how Mr. Jones knew they were going to Blackstead, and she felt rather annoyed at his impertinent curiosity, in consequence of which her manner was so reserved, not to say forbidding, that Mr. Jones in his turn wondered what was the matter with his secretary, and whether she would never be more friendly with him.

'I don't want to be familiar, goodness knows; but really to work for hours every day with a person who treats you as if you were her deadly enemy, and won't allow you even to ask if she is cold, and would like the window shut or sit nearer the fire, is annoying, you must own?' he complained to his mother.

The latter laughed at his aggrieved expression. 'Girls don't generally treat you so badly, do they? Well, it won't do you any harm to be snubbed for once in your life, though it's only by a City clerk,' she replied.

'Only a City clerk? A disguised duchess would be nearer the mark! I 'm helping Vava with her sums—Miss Vava, I beg her pardon—one has to be careful with any one belonging to Miss Wharton. I am surprised that she allows me to give her sister algebra lessons, as Vava calls it. What a stupid thing pride is, and, above all things, pride of birth. Think how much more she would enjoy life if she would be friends with us, instead of keeping us at a distance as if we were dirt under her feet!' cried the young man with irritation.

'You would not take so much trouble if she were plain, and perhaps she feels that,' observed his mother.

'I should be civil to her, and she would be civil to me, which is more than Miss Wharton is,' observed Mr. James Jones, taking up his hat to go to his office.

His mother looked after him with troubled eyes. 'I am dreadfully afraid he is

getting to like that girl,' she remarked to her husband.

'Then he'd better give it up, for she evidently doesn't care for him?' replied Mr. Jones.

'He's good-looking enough to please most girls,' said his wife.

'Yes, but Miss Wharton did not go to the City to flirt or fall in love, and I respect her all the more for it. I should like to ask her and that little sister of hers here; but I suppose it's no use, eh?' he inquired.

'Not a bit, especially as they are moving out of town; not but what I shall call upon them when they are settled at Blackstead, and I'll see if I can persuade them to come and dine here then,' she said.

Stella Wharton ought to have been much flattered at the desire for her society and the trouble these rich people were putting themselves to in order to make the acquaintance of their son's clerk; but it is to be feared that if she had known it would neither have flattered nor pleased her—poor proud Stella! But the kindness of the Hackneys pleased her, and she did not seem to mind accepting civilities from them.

It was Stella's house, taken in her name, and the other two were to share it for a year, furnishing their own rooms and a sitting-room; the rest was being furnished by Stella, chiefly from Lomore, where old 'nursie' was finding unexpected treasures.

'If only she could come herself, Stella!' said Vava wistfully.

But Stella replied decidedly, 'That is impossible; she could not possibly do the work of that house alone, and we cannot afford two servants.'

So Vava gave up all hope of seeing her old nurse until fate should take them north again.

The next time the youthful housekeepers went to Heather Road to measure rooms and windows, the exact sizes of which Mrs. Morrison wrote from Scotland that she wished to know, Mrs. Hackney as usual asked them to go in to tea with her, and, in the course of conversation with Stella, observed, 'If I may be allowed to make a suggestion, I should not get a servant at once; it will be amusing for a short time to do a little housework, and while everything is new and clean there will be no hard work to do. Besides, the Easter holidays are soon

coming, and you want to go to the sea for a few days to bring the roses back to this young lady's cheeks.'

'Oh I think it will be change enough to come out here,' said Stella quickly.

'Then you will have plenty of time to do your own work,' agreed Mrs. Hackney, guessing that motives of economy prevented the girls from going away at Easter, and respecting Stella's sturdy independence and thrifty ways.

Stella, for her part liked and respected Mrs. Hackney, and she and Amy decided to take her advice, and do without a servant, for the present at least.

In spite of Vava's disappointment at not having 'nursie' at No. 2 Heather Road, she found herself counting the days until they moved.

Nor was Eva less enthusiastic. Indeed, her enthusiasm went rather too far; she was always buying something or other 'for her bedroom.'

'There won't be an inch of wall-paper to be seen, Eva,' Vava warned her, as she showed her the tenth picture she had bought for it.

'Oh yes, there will; it's wonderful what a lot you can get into a room, and pictures brighten up a place,' she argued.

But one day Eva came to the club in a state of great excitement. 'Girls!' she cried, including Stella in this familiar address, 'I have just bought myself the sweetest suite of furniture you ever saw!'

Every one was surprised at this, for only the day before Eva had announced in melancholy tones that she had spent her last penny, and could buy no more pictures, for which she had developed a mania.

'I thought you had no money?' said Vava, with her usual impulsive candour.

'Oh that's all right; the man does not want to be paid yet. I know you don't approve of that; but it is a case of Hobson's choice with me, and heaps of people do it,' she said, turning to Stella.

'I only disapprove of it for myself. What is your suite like?' inquired Stella with extra geniality, because she wished to put Eva at her ease.

This was very easily done, for things, as a rule, did not go deep with that young lady, and she replied, 'It is inlaid walnut, and the wardrobe has three cheval-

glasses, so that you can see all sides of you at once and how your dress hangs, and that's a thing one never can see, and I do hate a skirt that dips at one side or is short in the front and draggles behind, so you can all come and look at yourselves in my glass before you go out; and the washing-stand is a dream too, with tiles hand-painted; so is the chest of drawers. You will all fall in love with it when you see it, as I did.'

'Was it very expensive?' asked Vava.

'No, not very, considering how beautiful it is,' replied Eva airily.

All this time Amy had said nothing, but looked rather grave, and now she inquired, 'Did you say you had bought it, Eva?'

'Yes—that's to say, I have ordered it, and it is to be sent down to 2 Heather Road on the 19th of March.'

This was the day before the girls were to move in; it was a Friday, and the Hackneys had offered to take in anything that was sent down beforehand, and suggested their coming in on the Saturday before quarter-day.

'It will prevent their breaking into another week's rent at their lodgings,' Mrs. Hackney had suggested to her husband. And as it was the most convenient day for them to move, it was decided to ask for a holiday from their various chiefs in the City, and start the new experiment on the 20th of March, and most of the furniture was being sent the day before.

But Amy looked hurt. 'Have you chosen it without me?' she asked.

Eva coloured up as she answered in rather a hurried way, 'I couldn't help it. I did it rather suddenly, and the man said he could not promise to keep it for me. Besides, I knew you would only object, now you've become so strait-laced and are furnishing your room out of packing-cases.'

Amy took no notice of this scornful accusation. 'But you can't have bought it alone? The man would never sell furniture on credit to a girl like you,' she protested.

Eva got very indignant. 'Why not? I suppose he knows he can trust me?' she said.

'But that is just what he cannot; you are only sixteen, and he could not recover from you if you did not pay. I can't understand it,' observed Amy.

'You are not wanted to; it's all arranged, and the suite will arrive on the 19th of March, and I shall pay so much a week honestly until I have paid up,' said Eva.

But Amy would not let the matter rest; and, failing to get any satisfaction out of Eva, she took counsel with Stella, rather to the latter's embarrassment. However, as Amy seemed to be really worried, Stella tried to comfort her without being false to her principles. 'It cannot be more than a few pounds. They get up these suites to look very pretty for a low sum, and if none of the drawers shut, as often happens, it will be a lesson to her; and as for the payments, fortunately she gets her money weekly, so she can pay regularly.'

'But she can only pay a few shillings a week, and that only by being very economical and self-denying, and Eva is neither by nature. Besides, I cannot get her to tell me where she bought it, nor what agreement she has signed,' said Amy.

'I think that may be because she knows we all disapprove of getting goods on credit,' suggested Stella.

'Still, there is something I do not understand about it; no reputable tradesman would enter into an agreement with a young girl like Eva. I hope—I do hope—she has not done anything foolish,' Amy said with a sigh.

Stella thought there was no doubt about that, though she did not say so, for she expected to see some showy, sham walnut suite which Eva had been inveigled into buying by some unscrupulous tradesman; but she only said, 'One learns by experience. I should not say any more about it; it is too late to stop her, and perhaps when we all live together she will be more open.'

But Amy had not told Stella her real fear, lest she should be shocked; but the truth was she was haunted by a horrid suspicion that Eva had bought the furniture in their names, or done something she was ashamed of; else why did she so obstinately refuse to say where she had bought it? But it was not much good asking herself these questions, for there was no answer to them for the present, and the answer when it did come was not pleasant.

In the meantime there was plenty to do, for they were to take possession of their new abode in a fortnight, and every minute was spent in running up casement cloth for curtains, hemming dusters, and shopping. Stella had not thought she could be so happy in this wilderness of bricks.

Mrs. Hackney was kindness itself, and yet she kept at a distance and never once came into the new house, which looked very pretty, with its papers, self-coloured in most of the rooms, though Eva had chosen a bright floral paper covered with pink roses.

Mr. Jones noticed the brighter looks of his secretary, though he made no remark, not even when she asked to be excused from coming to the office on the 20th of March, a request which he immediately granted.

And at last the eventful day came, and at the very early hour of six the four girls started from their respective houses. They travelled out by the same train, alighted at Blackstead, and set off for No. 2 Heather Road, where they arrived not long after seven o'clock to a series of surprises.



CHAPTER XV.

EVA'S PRESENTIMENT.

'I am tired already,' said Eva with a yawn, as they started from Blackstead Station to walk to Heather Road. It was not far, and it was too early for any cabs to be at the station.

'Take my arm,' said Vava with pretended sympathy.

But as Eva took it she sighed, instead of laughing, as she said, 'I feel dreadfully depressed, just as if something were going to happen.'

'So something is going to happen; we are going to have a home of our own again,' said Vava. 'But I don't see why that should make you so melancholy; it is not very flattering to us.'

'It's not that! You know I am just as keen about this house business as ever I was, and I consider I worked it very cleverly, for you would never have come here but for me. Confess now, would you?' said Eva.

'No, I don't suppose we should; but I don't know that you "worked it," as you call it, quite honestly,' replied Vava.

'If every one were as honest as you are, which means saying out just what you think, the world would be a very disagreeable place to live in,' retorted Eva.

Vava did not make any reply; she was beginning to feel a little of Eva's depression, for it did not seem promising to begin their new life together by quarrelling.

Presently Eva, who forgot what she had said five minutes after she had said it, remarked, 'You may laugh as much as you like.'

Vava was not laughing, but Eva did not notice that.

'But I have a presentiment that something will happen in this house. I woke up this morning with a dreadful weight on my mind, just as if some one were dead, and it's a dreadful feeling. Have you ever had it?'

'The feeling that some one were dead? Not unless it was true,' replied Vava.

'But it's not true now—at least as far as I know—so it must be a presentiment; or else why should I feel like this to-day of all days, when I was in such good spirits yesterday?' she demanded.

'Do you mean that you think that one of us is going to die?' inquired Vava in low tones. She was not superstitious, though like most Celts she had a vivid imagination.

But Eva was sorry when she saw how she had frightened Vava, and she said hastily, 'Of course not; I only felt as if things would go wrong. I dare say we shall find that some of the furniture has not arrived, or that your china has been broken on the way, or that the chimney smokes and we sha'n't be able to have any fire in the dining-room, or something horrid like that.'

'Well, you are a cheerful companion!' said Amy's voice from behind.

The two girls turned, and found that Stella and Amy had caught up to them and overheard Eva's prophecies about the state of things that awaited them.

'Eva has been having bad dreams or something, I think,' laughed Vava, who had recovered her spirits.

'I haven't. I only had a presentiment, and, mark my words, it will come true,' declared that young person.

'So have I a presentiment, and that is we shall find the fire lighted and a nice warm room to go into, thanks to Mrs. Hackney's kindness,' remarked Stella, as they turned the corner of the road.

The others looked at No. 2 Heather Road, which had come in sight; and, spying smoke come out of the chimney, laughed heartily at Stella's presentiment. So that it was a merry quartette, after all, which arrived at the new little house, and the sound of their young and joyous voices made Mrs. Hackney smile happily to herself.

'Oh mother, can't I just go in and bid them welcome? I do so want to see their faces and hear what they say when they see everything,' pleaded Doreen.

'No, Doreen; I will have no running in and out, and you are not to go near them to-day. I have left a message to say that if they want anything they are to come

and ask for it; but they will have plenty to do and talk about without you?' declared her mother.

So Doreen, who had already been into No. 2 with flowers for the vases, gave a sigh, and had to content herself with looking out of the back window, in the hope that Vava would go into the garden, and she would see her from there.

Stella put the key into the door and turned the handle, but found that it was already unlocked; and, making their way to the sitting-room which was to be furnished for the Whartons for their own use, they found to their delight that not only was the fire lit, but the breakfast was laid, and the room quite tidy and furnished.

Amy and Eva were loud in their exclamations of delight; but Stella and Vava stood quite still, with lumps in their throats, for the room was furnished exactly like Stella's little boudoir at Lomore, with the same carpet, curtains, and all, and even the same pictures on the wall, with a single oil-painting of her mother over the mantelpiece.

Vava was the first one to recover herself. 'Stella, it's just like Lomore!' and as Stella had chosen a paper like her former one, it really was like the old room.

'It's very kind of them,' she said, rather doubtfully.

'Kind of them! I should think it is! And fancy Mrs. Hackney guessing where all the furniture used to go! Do you remember that bureau always stood on the left of the window, just like that, and the little table in the bow? I expect nursie or David wrote and told them!' exclaimed Vava.

'It is very kind,' repeated Stella in the same constrained voice.

Seeing that the two sisters were agitated at sight of the familiar objects, Amy and Eva, with tact, went upstairs to look at the latter's suite, and give them time to recover themselves.

'Kind! of course it is. What is the matter, Stella? You never seem to like people doing kind things. Aren't you pleased that David took the trouble to pack all these things so carefully that they are not a bit scratched or spoilt, and aren't you obliged to Mrs. Hackney for making the room like our old sitting-room at home?' demanded Vava half-impatiently.

'It was very good of David, and of course I am grateful to him; and Mrs.

Hackney meant to be kind too, but I think she ought to have asked me before she unpacked my private things,' said Stella.

Vava looked thoughtful. She felt that Stella was in the right about this. 'But they are not private, Stella; they are only furniture, and she meant to be kind, and she has got all this nice breakfast ready. I think she is in the kitchen, for I can hear some one poking the fire. Do let's go and thank her, and please be nice and smile at her, Stella,' Vava begged her.

Stella smiled at this, and it was with smiles on their faces that they picked their way along the passage through packing-cases into the kitchen. But when they opened the door the smiles changed into wild cries of delight, and her English friends would have been surprised if they had seen the way in which the reserved and cold Miss Wharton threw her arms round the neck of the respectable middle-aged servant, who turned and held out her arms to her 'bairns.'

'You thought your old nursie was going to let you keep house all by yourselves, with no one to look after you, did you?' she said, as she smoothed their hair and petted them both as if they were little children.

'Then it was you who unpacked our things? Stella thought some one had been taking a liberty. Stella's dreadfully afraid of people taking liberties with her, nursie,' said Vava.

'And quite right too! Dearie me! if you knew how I've worried at the thought of you two lambs alone in this great city! But it's all right now; I'm here to look after you. And you've very decent neighbours, who know their place, and are very obliging without being forward at all,' said Mrs. Morrison, for she it was.

'Oh I forgot Doreen; I must just go and tell her how glad we are to see nursie. Fancy her never letting it out, for she must have known it, and Mrs. Hackney too!' cried Vava, preparing to rush off as she spoke.

'Hoots, Miss Vava, what can you be thinking of, running off without ever asking your elder sister's leave, and she your guardian and all?' said Mrs. Morrison reprovingly.

'I didn't think.—May I go, Stella?' she said.

'Yes, but don't stay, and thank Mrs. Hackney for ordering the coals and the gasman,' said Stella.

'You'd better say for all she has done, for she met me at the station, and brought me across London herself, or I doubt if I'd ever have got here; it fairly bewildered me,' said their old nurse.

'When did you come, nursie?' inquired Vava.

'On Wednesday. I wanted to get over the journey and the strangeness of things before you came, and to get things a bit straight; but I've only been able to settle the kitchen and your own sitting-room and one bedroom. I could not take it upon me to interfere with the two young leddies' rooms, and indeed I did not know where to put their furniture. There's only furniture for one bedroom between the two of them, though that's fine. They would have done better to have got two smaller sets, or a few pieces at a time, I'm thinking, instead of spending all that money on one suite, as the man called it,' remarked Mrs. Morrison.

'It belongs to one of them; the other is getting hers, a piece at a time, as you suggest,' said Stella.

'She'll be a sensible young lady. What are they like?' continued Mrs. Morrison.

Vava left Stella to describe their new house-mates, and also to talk things over with Mrs. Morrison, who had a great deal to tell her and ask her, and ran off to see Doreen, who was rewarded for her patience by Vava's delight.

'I'm just so happy I don't know what to do!' she cried, her eyes shining and her cheeks so rosy that Mrs. Hackney felt as if the sea-breezes could very well be done without.

'She is a nice old woman, your old nurse,' said Doreen.

'She's not old; she's only middle-aged.—And she says—at least Stella says—I am to thank you for all your kindness, and nursie is very grateful to you too,' said Vava to Mrs. Hackney.

'She is a treasure, and I am very glad you have her. Thank you for coming in Vava; and now run and have your breakfast; you ought to have a fine appetite for it after all this excitement, especially as you did not have much breakfast before you started, I expect,' said Mrs. Hackney.

'We did not have any. Our landlady said she could not get breakfasts at that unearthly hour, as she should not be up herself, so we just had some biscuits, and I am hungry. But, oh I am glad to have said good-bye to those horrid lodgings!'

cried Vava with feeling.

'You have much to be thankful for,' observed Mrs. Hackney.

'Yes, and I am thankful,' said Vava simply. Then she went back to her new home, and found Stella, Amy, and Eva in the kitchen, talking happily to Mrs. Morrison, who quite approved of the two strangers, and was inclined to take them to her motherly heart when she found that they were orphans like her own bairns, and had been well brought up, and were well-mannered young ladies. Then the four went in to breakfast.

'What about your presentiment now?' cried Vava, turning to Eva, who had quite recovered her good spirits.

'It has come to pass. I said something was going to happen, and you see it has. Fancy your old nurse being here without your knowing anything about it!' cried Eva.

'You said you had a bad presentiment about something having gone wrong, and nursie's coming is not wrong at all; it has put things right,' persisted Vava.

'Oh well, I haven't got any presentiment now, so it's all right,' declared Eva.

'And presentiments are very foolish things,' said Stella rather primly.

The breakfast was a very good one. Mrs. Morrison had made porridge and hot scones, and had brought honey with her from the north, and the girls sat over their meal a long time, forgetting the work they had before them, until Amy started up, saying, 'We had better begin putting up the curtains and getting the rooms ready. My bedroom is chaos, and Eva's is not much better.'

Stella had noticed that Amy was very quiet during breakfast, and it occurred to her that perhaps the girl was disturbed at the arrival of Mrs. Morrison. It made it look as if the house and the ordering of it were to be entirely Stella's, whereas it had been arranged that she and Amy should share in the management. So, leaving Vava with Eva to clear away, she followed Amy to her room, which did indeed look chaotic.

Amy had bought a nice bed and a chest of drawers and washstand of light oak, very simple but quite pretty, and these, with one chair and some boxes and pictures, were all her furniture.

'We shall soon make this look pretty; and, if you will use it, there is an extra arm-chair which they have sent down from Lomore that I should like you to have,' said the Scotch girl.

'Thank you, I should like it very much, if you can spare it; but you must value anything that comes from your old home,' replied Amy, who seemed a little depressed.

'Yes, that is why it is such a pleasure to have Mrs. Morrison with us; she is almost like a mother to us. She was with my mother before she was married. I hope you don't mind her coming?' asked Stella.

'Mind? I am delighted; I like her already, and I don't mind saying that I was rather dreading the housekeeping and managing. It is all very well when you have nothing else to do, but it is difficult to do two things well. My City work gets rather heavy in spring, and I am often not home till late, and then I am too tired to do anything but sit quietly by the fire and read a book.'

'You will like her the more the more you know her,' said Stella, much relieved; and then added, 'I thought something had vexed you.'

'Oh it had nothing at all to do with Mrs. Morrison; it was only Eva's suite; but it's no use talking about it, or to her. The thing is done, and something has come over Eva lately; she is not a bit like what she used to be. I have been hoping that Vava would do her good; but they don't seem to get on quite as well as I hoped,' replied Amy.

'Vava is a little too outspoken, but I hope they will be friends; I think she will have a good influence over Eva, because she is so very frank. I am sorry you don't like the furniture Eva has bought. Is it very gimcrack?' inquired Stella.

'Gimcrack! I only wish it were; it's far too handsome. I don't know how much she paid for it, but it can't have cost less than twenty pounds at the least!' exclaimed Amy.

'Shall we go and look at it?' suggested Stella, who was curious to see this much-talked-of furniture, and the two went into Eva's room, where they found Vava admiring herself in the three cheval glasses of the wardrobe.

'Look, Stella, isn't this a lovely idea, and isn't it a lovely suite?' cried Vava, twisting and turning herself.

'Yes, it is very handsome,' said Stella, and said no more, and then, after a few polite remarks about the pictures, which Eva was just hanging, she left the room, and was followed by Amy.

'How on earth did the man give it her, and where do you think she has got it?' demanded Amy when they were back in her bedroom.

'I don't know. I am afraid it is a very expensive suite; but it is no good worrying about it. It seems so dreadful that a girl of sixteen should have no one to look after her, no near relation, and no guardian, except yourself, and you are only a friend, after all, and have no authority over her. We must just be as friendly as we can to her, and try and win her confidence, and if she won't give it, wait until the man turns up for his money, which he will soon do if she does not pay up.'

'Then he will remove it, and that will disgrace us all!' cried Amy.

'No, indeed, he will not; I shall not allow anything of that kind,' declared Stella with decision.

And then, though 'Eva's suite' was often in their minds, they dismissed the subject from their conversation, and started upon the putting in order of the new house.



CHAPTER XVI.

VAVA'S BUSINESS LETTER.

Eva's presentiment was already a thing of the past, for she was the merriest of the four, and the day would not have been half such fun nor have passed so pleasantly and easily if she had not made a joke of all difficulties, and helped by her suggestions, which were very shrewd, in spite of their being mixed up with a great deal of nonsense.

Mrs. Morrison had made the Misses Whartons' large bedroom habitable, and in a very short time it was pronounced quite comfortable for the present; so there really were only the hall and staircase to arrange, about which Eva had numerous theories, which she propounded sitting on the top stair in an apron made of newspapers.

'Leave half a yard at each end for moving the stair-carpet up and down every week,' she observed.

'That is a very good idea, if we have enough,' replied Amy.

'If not, you must put mats at the turnings of the stair; it's most important; also, you must put a pad on each step, then you feel as if you were sinking into velvet,' came from Eva, still sitting at her ease and surveying the workers.

'What kind of pad?' asked Stella, who with Amy was laying the stair-carpet.

'Velvet,' said Eva, absent-mindedly.

'What nonsense, Eva! What do you mean?' demanded Amy.

Eva, who had been looking out of the staircase window, turned her head. 'I wasn't thinking of what I was saying—felt, I mean—or, failing that, folds of newspapers, and by so doing you double the life of your carpet,' she explained.

'Then, suppose you go and get that pile of newspapers that came from Scotland, and fold them into pads, instead of sitting there coolly and watching us work?' suggested her friend.

'I might, for a consideration,' agreed Eva, and help she did with such good-will that the house was quite comfortable by night.

Mrs. Morrison kept to her kitchen, and sent in a nice dinner, for which Vava laid the table, having spent her morning flitting in and out of the kitchen, helping 'nursie,' as she imagined, and it is doubtful which of them was the happier—the old Scotchwoman, who had her bairns with her again, or the child, who obeyed her old nurse more willingly than her elder sister.

'Vava, the post has just brought this. I wish you would sit down and answer it politely, and say that I am obliged by his kind offer, but that I shall be at the office on Monday morning at the usual time,' said Stella, coming into the kitchen with an open letter in her hand, which she handed to her younger sister.

Vava took it, and found that it was a very polite letter from the junior partner, saying, that as he understood they were moving and would be busy for a few days, he would be glad for her to take a holiday, and thought they would manage without her till Wednesday. 'He is kind, and I'm sure I don't know why, for you never smile at him, and till you do smile you really look disagreeable,' commented Vava.

'I am sorry, but I shall continue to look disagreeable then, for I have no intention of smiling at Mr. James Jones, or any other stranger with whom I have business,' observed Stella.

'Why don't you answer it yourself? It's got nothing to do with me,' grumbled Vava.

'Because I am busy; you can tell him that,' said Stella; who might have added, 'Because I do not choose to,' but she refrained.

'My lamb, you should not answer your sister as you do'

'My lamb, you should not answer your sister as you do,' said Mrs. Morrison, when Stella had left the kitchen, her head very much in the air.

'She aggravates me with her airs and unfriendliness,' said Vava in an apologetic tone.

'And who are you to criticise your elders in that unbecoming way? What do you know of the world? Miss Stella is quite right not to be too friendly with strangers and to keep her bonny smiles for friends; and even if she were not right, it is not for you to question her doings or sayings, and she your guardian,' protested her old nurse with decision.

'She is not so very old after all—only seven years older than I am; last year she was an infant in the eye of the law,' announced the girl, who had read this piece of information somewhere.

'She is of age this year, at any rate, Miss Vava, and you had better do as she bids you; she knows what she is about, and you will understand it better in seven years' time—seven years make a great difference in a young girl; so write that letter like a good child, and don't worry Miss Stella, who has plenty to do without fashing herself about letter-writing,' admonished Mrs. Morrison.

'But you know, nursie, this is a business letter, and he is the man she gets her living by; she really might be civil to him. Suppose he gets offended and tells her to go? That would be a nice thing, just after we have got into a new house!' exclaimed Vava.

'If he is a business man he'll not be so silly as to be offended because a young lady isn't too friendly; and if he is so foolish, the sooner she leaves his office and gets with sensible people the better. That will do for those currants, Miss Vava, they are quite clean now, and I'll make the pudding while you write that letter. You'll find paper and stamps and all in the bureau in the sitting-room,' said nurse.

Vava went off as she was told, and found that nurse had 'found up' a quantity of writing-paper and envelopes at Lomore, as well as stamps, all of which she had packed into the bureau and brought south with her, besides other treasures, the looking over which took Vava some time. But at last she set to work to write the letter; and, being very much excited by all the events of the day, she took a large sheet of paper, and wrote a long letter to the junior partner, which was likely to amuse him very much. It ran as follows:

'DEAR MR. JONES,—Thank you very much for offering to give my sister a holiday. She says to tell you she is very busy putting down the stair-carpet, so can't answer herself; but she will be quite able to

come to the office on Monday morning at the usual time. She did not say she was putting down the stair-carpet, but she is; it's a horrid work, as you have to pad it. When I 'm rich I'll have workmen to do all that when I move house, and never go near it till it's quite tidy. I can't find a single thing.

'The other Joneses who have bought Lomore (I hope they are no relation of yours) have been very kind; they have sent down all the furniture of Stella's sitting-room, and lots and lots of things that they must want themselves, and I'm sorry I called them "horrid;" they have been very friendly to us, and even brought us to town in their motor. I only said that because I felt horrid at that moment to think of an English Jones being Laird of Lomore. Oh dear! I forgot your name was Jones; but I would not mind your being laird so much, you look a great deal more like one than old Mr. Montague Jones. But our old nurse, whom we found here this morning, says he has been very good to all the old servants, and is not turning out one, or changing anything; so things might have been worse. I must stop and help to put the house in order.—I remain, your sincere friend,
VAVA WHARTON.

'P.S.—Please be sensible, and don't mind Stella being so stiff and stuck-up; it's being poor that makes her like that, and I'm sure she's grateful to you, really. V. W.'

Now, Vava was a very open child; but it never entered her head that she ought not to have written a letter like that to Mr. James Jones, nor that her sister would expect to see it. 'Nursie' had said that there were stamps there, and evidently meant her to write, close, and post the letter, so as to save Stella trouble, and this she accordingly did, as there happened to be a pillar-box just outside the front-gate.

Stella, who was still putting down the stair-carpet, heard the gate click, and observed, 'Oh dear, I hope that nobody is coming; they can't come through the hall.'

'No, it is only Vava; she is posting a letter,' replied Eva, who from the top stair, where she was folding newspapers to form pads, could see the front-gate and road.

Stella stopped abruptly in her work. 'I wouldn't'——she began; and then,

dropping the hammer, she continued, 'I will be back in a minute, Miss Overall; I just want to speak to Vava,' and went into the sitting-room to await her sister.

Vava saw her through the bay-window, and went in to her, saying cheerfully, 'I've written the letter and posted it and everything.'

'Why did you not show it to me first?' demanded Stella.

'Why should I? I never thought of it. Besides, you never read my letters; you always say you trust me,' said Vava.

'So I do; but you do sometimes say things you had better not have said, and as this is my business I think you should have brought the letter to me. What did you say in it?'

Upon reflection, Vava was not sure that she wanted to tell Stella what she had written, and upon further reflection she began to doubt whether she ought to have written it. 'I told him you thanked him for his offer of holiday, and that you were busy putting down the stair-carpet, so had told me to write, and that you would be there on Monday at the usual time. That's all I said about you—I mean about your business. The rest of the letter was just a friendly one from myself,' she said.

This was just what Stella was afraid of, and she exclaimed, 'I never told you to say what I was doing.'

'I told him that,' interrupted Vava.

Stella was speechless for a moment; then she continued, in a tone of exasperation, 'Will you please tell me what you did say, Vava?'

'It's got nothing to do with you. Mr. Jones has been very kind to me, and I just wrote him a friendly letter; but it sounds silly repeated. Don't bother about it, Stella; if you were so particular about the letter you should have written it yourself,' retorted Vava.

'I wish I had—I wish to goodness I had!' she exclaimed, and went out of the room.

Vava felt rather uncomfortable for a time; and then, saying to herself that Stella made a great fuss about nothing, she went off to the kitchen to help Mrs. Morrison to prepare tea for them.

Stella seemed to have forgotten her annoyance when she came in to tea, for she was laughing heartily; but when Vava asked her if she were tired, she said, 'No,' very coldly, and addressed no more conversation to her.

Vava consequently talked to Eva; but this kind of thing could not go on, and after tea, when she found herself with Mrs. Morrison, she unburdened herself to her old nurse. 'And you see, nursie, I don't know what to do. If I don't tell Stella she will be horrid and cold with me; and if I do tell her she will be frightfully annoyed,' she explained.

But Mrs. Morrison would not sympathise with her. 'You ought not to write letters you do not wish your sister to see; you have done very wrong, and must go and tell Miss Stella so at once, and if she is angry and scolds you you must bear it,' she said decidedly.

'There was no harm in what I said, and—and, nursie, I simply can't tell Stella!' cried Vava, as her postscript came into her mind.

Mrs. Morrison looked at her gravely. 'What did you say, my lamb? Tell me,' she inquired.

Vava told her, as well as she could remember, all that she had said in the letter.

A grim look of amusement came over the good woman's face; but she turned away and poked the fire to prevent Vava seeing it, and when she turned round again she was quite grave as she replied, with a shake of her head, 'You should not have said that about Mr. Montague Jones being "horrid," you let your pen run on too fast, and you should not have written that bit about Miss Stella, and you may well say that she will be annoyed. But for all that, you must tell her what was in the letter, and it will be a lesson to you to mind what you write in future.'

Vava groaned, but went off obediently and told Stella, who listened in silence till she came to the postscript, whereat she gave an exclamation; but all she said when Vava had finished was, 'I am glad you told me, for I think I can prevent Mr. Jones getting that letter. I was so busy this morning that I forgot that to-day was Saturday, and that consequently the letter would not arrive any sooner than myself on Monday morning; so that you need not have written at all.'

'But, Stella, what will you do? You can't take away a letter addressed to Mr. Jones. The clerks may tell him how many there were, and he would miss it,'

protested Vava.

'I have no intention of touching Mr. Jones's correspondence without his knowledge; but, as I get there before him, I shall ask him not to open that particular letter, and I shall tell him why,' replied Stella.

'Then he might as well read it!' cried Vava.

'I shall not tell him what you said,' replied Stella; and as she had evidently made up her mind on the subject, Vava said no more, but she wished with all her heart that she had never written the unfortunate letter.

However, Stella was friends with her again, and the first day at Heather Road ended happily enough; for, tired though they were, the four girls were able to go to bed in a tidy house, with carpets, curtains, and furniture in their proper places, which was really a comfortable home again.



CHAPTER XVII.

A SUNDAY AT HEATHER ROAD.

'Stella! Stella! wake up! the sun is shining, and I can see a tree, and hear birds singing, and I feel so happy that I really must get up, although it is Sunday morning and we have not to go off to the City!' cried Vava the next morning.

Stella opened her eyes and looked at her sister, smiling. 'One might almost be in the country—everything looks so fresh and clean; we must try and keep it so, and help nursie as much as we can, for she is not used to much housework,' she replied.

'I don't mind how much I do to save her as long as we can have her with us. I think I had better get up and light the fire for her; I dare say she will be tired this morning,' observed Vava, sitting up in bed.

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Morrison, bearing a tray, came into the room with a cheery, 'Good-morning, young leddies!'

'Oh nursie, I meant to light the fire and get breakfast ready for you!' cried Vava.

'What would you do that for? I am not tired; it's you that must be worn-out, so here's your breakfasts for you, and you can just stay where you are for a while, and get up in time for the kirk, which is not far off, I hear,' replied Mrs. Morrison, unfolding their table-napkins, and waiting on them as she used to do when they were children.

Suddenly Vava exclaimed, 'Nursie, I must get up; the others will be hungry too!'

'And why will they be hungry, when they are eating their breakfasts quite comfortably?' inquired the good woman quietly.

'That is good of you, nursie; but you must not wait upon us strong people!' protested Stella.

'That's only for to-day, because you are all just worn-out, and I knew you would oversleep yourselves. Next week I'll be obliged if you will just make your own beds and tidy your own rooms a bit,' nurse answered.

'Have we overslept ourselves?' inquired Stella; and, taking out her watch, she exclaimed with surprise, 'A quarter to nine! How could we have slept so late?'

'I expect it's the quiet after the noise of Westminster and the exciting day we had yesterday,' said Vava, who was enjoying her breakfast in bed.

It was a very happy day. Stella, Vava, and Mrs. Morrison went to their own church, and Amy went to hers alone, for Eva was not up.

When Eva came down to dinner she said with a yawn, 'You are energetic, you good people; I hope you feel better for having been to church; you looked most frightfully righteous coming in with large prayer-books in your hands. For my part, I think one can be just as religious without ever going to church at all.'

'Perhaps, but I think if one can go to church one should, and I do feel better for having been this morning,' said Stella quietly.

When she found herself alone with Amy she asked her whether Eva really never went to church.

Amy looked worried as she replied, 'I am afraid she has got into bad habits lately. She says she is tired on Sunday mornings, and that it is the only day she can rest, and that she does not notice that people are any the better for going; in fact, she says, they generally come back cross and complaining of the heat or cold of the church or the length of the sermon.'

'That's the kind of things people always say when they want to defend themselves for not going to church. But if she is tired in the morning, surely she can go in the evening?' suggested Stella.

'Perhaps you will be able to persuade her; I cannot,' responded Amy.

But Stella shook her head. 'I shall not try; I do not believe in arguing about such things. We must try by our own example to make her see that churchgoing does make us feel better. I know it made me feel ashamed of my discontent these last three months. I have hated my life here and every one around me; and I certainly don't deserve things to have turned out so well,' she said humbly.

'And the funny part of it is that Eva has really been the person to bring it about, and—I don't like saying so—she managed to twist what I said, and what you said, so as to make us each believe that the one was quite willing for the move and was only kept back by the other,' observed Amy, who had resented this

management when she found it out.

'It has happened to answer in this case, but it does not generally answer, and I am sorry for her sake that she has succeeded in getting her way by rather crooked means,' said Stella.

The girls had yet to learn that 'the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small,' and that the experiment which had started in so promising a manner might turn out a failure, and that Eva had time yet to repent of her 'clever management.' At present, however, everything was *couleur de rose*, and after tea they all sat round the fire in the Whartons' sitting-room, while Stella played hymns on her piano, and Eva, who had a very pretty voice, joined in very heartily, to Mrs. Morrison's delight.

'Let's go for a walk; I've got my presentiment again,' announced Eva, shutting up her hymn-book and jumping up from her chair.

Mrs. Morrison looked at her over the top of her spectacles. 'What might you have?' she inquired, thinking that Eva was complaining of not feeling well.

'The hump, Mrs. Morrison, and I want a walk to shake it off,' she replied.

Mrs. Morrison did not understand this slang; but she understood that Eva felt depressed, and said, 'A walk will do you all good, and you will just have time to go over the hill yonder before church.'

Eva did not like to say that she was not going to church, but she privately decided to return home and amuse herself by trying over some waltzes while the rest were all at church.

The four accordingly set out for their walk; and, as Eva was a very entertaining companion, Vava enjoyed the walk with her. Amy and Stella were becoming such fast friends that they had dropped the formal 'Miss' in speaking to each other, and they enjoyed the walk. Mrs. Morrison had told them she should go straight to church. On the way back they passed the Presbyterian Church; and the two Whartons, remarking that they were only five minutes too early, turned in there.

'Won't you come to church with me, Eva?' asked Amy as the two walked on together.

'No, thank you; I have something to do at home. It's so jolly having a home that I

prefer to stay in it. I sha'n't plague you to come to the pictures every night now,' replied Eva, going off.

But Eva had counted without her host, as Mrs. Morrison, having supposed that they would all go to church, had locked up and gone out, taking the key with her. As they were not on a main road, the door was not kept latched, and so they had no latchkeys. There was a light in the hall, and Eva turned the handle of the door, expecting it to open; but in vain. Then it flashed upon her that she was locked out, and must either wait there for an hour and a half or else go to church; neither of which things did she wish to do. A thought then struck her, and she knocked at the Hackneys' door; but they were all out, it appeared, for she knocked in vain. So turning away in annoyance, Eva sauntered back to the main street where Amy had gone to church.

'I believe that Scotchwoman did it on purpose; she thought I ought to go to church, and so she locked me out of my own home. But if she thinks she's going to manage me she's very much mistaken, as she will find, and I'll just show her that,' she said to herself; for she had just come to a brilliantly lighted cinematograph show, and made up her mind to go in there.

It was the first time she had gone there on Sunday, and to make herself feel more comfortable she had to remind herself that she must put her foot down and not be dictated to by strangers; and soon the music and the scenes before her distracted her thoughts, and this was what Eva really wanted. For some of her thoughts were troubling her, and she wanted to banish them.

But unfortunately the pictures could not last for ever, and when they were over there was Mrs. Morrison to face; and though Mrs. Morrison had a very kindly face, and had been very friendly and nice to Eva, whom she liked, the latter had a feeling that she could be very stern, and that she would disapprove of going to an entertainment on Sunday evening. To her surprise, when she came out there were no churchgoers to be seen in the streets, and when she passed Amy's church it was in darkness, and she guessed that it must be past nine o'clock, and that the others would be home.

'That comes of leaving my watch at home and trusting that man, who said we should be out before nine,' she muttered to herself, and hurried to Heather Road.

'Here she is!' cried a voice as Eva opened the gate; and Vava, who was standing looking out of the bow-window, came running to the door to greet her.

'We are so very sorry you were locked out! Mrs. Morrison understood you were both going to church, and she hurried home so as to be back before you. But it will not happen again; we will have a latch put on, and have our own keys,' said Stella, apologising.

'It doesn't matter. I had a headache, so did not go to church,' said Eva.

'And have you been walking about all this time in the dark by yourself? How horrid; nursie will be vexed!' cried Vava.

'I enjoyed myself very much, thank you,' said Eva, escaping upstairs to take off her hat and coat.

She had not said where she had been; and though Amy, who knew her, did not believe she had walked for more than two hours after their long walk, and guessed what she had done, no one asked any questions. For that Eva was thankful, and in spite of a bad conscience, which should have pricked her, she enjoyed the pie which Mrs. Morrison had made the day before and left in the oven to heat up along with baked potatoes.

'Sunday's dinner and supper always cook themselves,' she explained.

As a kind of amends for her un-Sunday-like day, Eva went into the kitchen and asked Mrs. Morrison if she might help her to wash-up.

It was on the tip of the good woman's tongue to refuse, and tell her that she must be too tired to stand about any more; but a glance at Eva's face showed that the girl was not tired, and some intuition told her that she had better accept the offer and try and make friends with this girl, who, after all, was only sixteen, and had no one to keep her in order. So she said, 'Thank you kindly, Miss Barnes, my dear; if you take this mop you will not put your hands in the water so much, and as I never use soda they will not get spoilt, and here 's a nice apron for you.'

Eva accordingly, enveloped in a large apron, stood at the tub and conversed with the Scotchwoman, who watched her quick movements with interest and admiration, for she was very graceful, and she did her work in a very business-like manner, which pleased the methodical housekeeper.

'There's a right way and a wrong way of doing everything, but you've got the right way of washing-up, and it makes a deal of difference, though folk won't believe it. I can't bear to see a young girl doing a few things at a time, and then going to find some more, and putting in the greasy things first, and the glasses

and silver last,' she observed.

'My mother taught me that; once a week we went into the kitchen to learn how to do cooking and kitchen-work,' said Eva, and she gave a sigh.

'She must have been a wise woman and a good mother. Have you lost her long, my poor bairn?' inquired the housekeeper.

'A year and a half, but it feels like ten,' said Eva; and then she began to tell Mrs. Morrison about her past life at the pretty home in Cambridge, of which she had never spoken to Vava. 'Things were very different then,' she wound up.

'But they are not so bad now, and you have your old friends. Do you never see them or hear from them?' inquired the housekeeper.

'They have written, but I don't care to answer them. They have asked me to go and stay with them, and wanted to come and see me; but I had not a nice place to ask them to come to, and I won't stay with people I can't ask back.'

'I think you are wrong there; anybody would like to have a bright young leddie like you as a visitor, and you would like to see your old friends again, I'm sure. At any rate, now you have a nice home, and we'll soon have your sitting-room fit to receive a queen,' said Mrs. Morrison.

'I'll write to Mrs. Croker. She often comes to town, and she has a daughter just my age, only she is still at school and going on to college, and I am working for my living and not learning anything,' said Eva, a little bitterly.

'But you should be learning; you can get books anywhere, and can always improve yourself in the evenings. You shouldn't let Miss Croker get before you,' said Mrs. Morrison.

The good woman's interest touched Eva, and had its effect; for she delighted Mrs. Croker by writing to her and telling her where she was, and what she was doing; and Mrs. Croker said to her husband, 'I am so glad she has written. I was so vexed at losing sight of her, but she seemed to want to drop us all.'

'People do when they are poor, and she felt having her education stopped. You must ask her down for Easter. She has a few days then, I suppose?' replied the professor.

So the first Sunday at Heather Road did them all good in different ways.



CHAPTER XVIII.

STELLA'S SURPRISING REQUEST.

'I shall breakfast a little earlier than usual to-morrow morning, Vava,' said Stella when they were going to bed that night.

'Doreen says she catches the 8.40, so we shall be in plenty of time if we have breakfast at eight o'clock,' objected Vava.

'You can go with Doreen by that train, but I shall take the 8.20,' replied her sister.

Vava coloured up, for she remembered in a flash that it was to secure that unlucky letter of hers that her sister was going up to town so early. 'Oh that letter!' she said, in such dejected tones that Stella was sorry for her.

'Never mind, Vava; I will not let Mr. Jones have that letter, so you need not worry,' she said.

'Don't you think I had better come with you?' suggested Vava.

'No! What for? I shall know your handwriting; there is no need for you to be there, and I should think it would be rather uncomfortable for you,' said Stella, lifting her eyebrows.

'I sha'n't feel uncomfortable. I feel quite at home with Mr. Jones, and I think I could ask for the letter back much better than you,' persisted Vava.

'Why?' inquired Stella, getting annoyed at her sister's persistence.

'Because it is my letter, and one has more right to ask for one's own letter than for other people's. Perhaps he'll refuse to give it to you; he'll think it will get me into a row,' suggested Vava.

'In that case I shall walk straight out of his office,' declared Stella, very angry at this last suggestion of Vava's.

'For goodness' sake don't do that, Stella! Leave the letter alone. Mr. Jones is much too gentlemanly to take any notice of what I said; besides, he knew it all before,' said Vava.

But Stella, who had calmed down, ignored this advice. 'You did not mean any harm, Vava, and it must be very difficult for an impulsive girl like you to think before you say or do things; you will know better when you are older,' was all she said.

But Vava saw her sister start off with many misgivings, which she imparted to the housekeeper. 'Mr. Jones won't like Stella going and looking over his private correspondence. You know City men don't like their lady-clerks taking liberties of that kind,' she declared.

'Miss Stella is not one to take a liberty,' affirmed the housekeeper.

'She may not think it a liberty, but it is one, and I should not be surprised if they quarrelled over it, because she really is rather disagreeable to him; and I don't see why she need have made all that fuss, nor why she would not let me go myself,' argued Vava.

'Miss Vava, my bairn, you think too much of yourself and your wits. I know you are quicker than your elder sister, but that's not to say you have more brains; and, even if you had, you have not as much knowledge as she has,' Mrs. Morrison admonished her.

Vava was just going to say that she had more sense about some things, but happily she abstained; and having finished her breakfast she went to the window to look out for Doreen, who had promised to call for her.

The other two girls went to town by a later train; so Vava, seeing Doreen coming out of her gate, called out good-bye to Amy and Eva, and went to meet her friend.

'Isn't Miss Wharton coming with us?' Doreen inquired, rather disappointed, for she admired Stella greatly.

'She has gone; she had some business to do at the office, so she went early,' explained Vava.

'She does work hard, and so do you. Miss Courteney said the other day that we might take an example from you in that; you do what you have to do with all your might, and so quickly too, and yet you are not a bit serious by nature,' commented Doreen.

Vava was very pleased at this praise; but, remembering nursie's lecture on not

thinking too much of herself, she replied, 'I can't do things by halves, I suppose because I have too much energy. I wish sometimes I did not go at things so hard. I don't take time to think, and so I make a lot of mistakes.'

'We all make mistakes; I've made some mistake in this problem, and I can't get it right,' said Doreen, taking out her algebra.

'I can tell you how to do that,' said Vava, for it was one Mr. Jones had helped her with; and the two were soon deep in algebra, which lasted them until they got to the City.

'What a short journey!' said Vava as they alighted at the City station.

And yet that morning Stella had said to herself what a long journey it was. All the same, when she got out at that City station she wished she were just leaving home. To the proud, sensitive girl the business before her was very unpleasant, and she had magnified its importance till she felt as if she must get that letter or leave the office.

Mrs. Ryan was dusting the office when she arrived, and was surprised to see her. 'Mr. Jones did not expect you to-day, miss. He stopped late on Saturday answering a lot of letters himself, and said he should not be here till late this morning, as you would not be coming,' she told Stella.

'There was no need for me to stay at home, as we got the house nearly straight on Saturday. We had a delightful surprise; our old nurse and housekeeper was there. She is going to keep house for us, so we shall be very comfortable,' said Stella, smiling.

'I am glad to hear that; she will look after you, and it's much better to have some older person with you, for you are all very young to be householders,' said the old woman, going on with her dusting.

'Have the letters come, Mrs. Ryan?' inquired Stella anxiously.

'Yes, they get here by eight o'clock; they are in the letter-box,' replied the housekeeper.

'Where is the letter-box?' asked Stella.

Mrs. Ryan looked a little surprised at the question as she replied, 'On the door.'

Stella looked at the door, but saw none.

'Not that door; the door of the outside office,' explained Mrs. Ryan.

Stella was a little uncomfortable, but she felt she must get Vava's letter before any one came in, and she went to the letter-box, which, of course, was locked, as she might have expected if she had but thought a little. But Stella Wharton was not easily turned from a purpose she had formed; and, coming back to the housekeeper, she asked the woman if she had the key or knew where it was kept.

If Mrs. Ryan had been surprised before she was doubly surprised now, and said in rather shocked accents, 'No, I have not the key, nor do I know where Mr. Jones keeps his; and, if you'll excuse my saying so, Miss Wharton, I should not tell you if I did know, for City gentlemen don't care to have their correspondence meddled with. I know you only want to get to your work; but I know more about City ways than you, and I advise you not to do more than is your work. The head-clerk always unlocks the letter-box, and brings the letters into Mr. Jones when he arrives.'

Stella listened to this speech in silence. She did think of taking the good woman into her confidence; but a dislike of talking about her private concerns prevented her, so she said nothing. Going to her room, she took off her hat and coat, and sat down to wait until the head-clerk should appear and she should hear him unlocking the letter-box, a noise she remembered hearing about ten o'clock every morning. The half-hour seemed very long, and she grew so nervous that she gave a great start when she heard a step, and presently two or three more, and then the sound of the letter-box being opened.

She waited a moment, and then, summoning up her courage, she went up to the head-clerk, to whom, as it happened, she had never spoken, and asked him politely if she might have Mr. James Jones's letters.

The man, who had been in the employment of the firm for twenty-five years, stood, his hands full of letters, and stared at her. In all his years of service such a request had never been made to him. He had been rather flattered by Stella speaking to him at all, for she appeared, as a rule, not to be aware of the existence of any of them; but this request was so unusual that the man did not answer at once.

'Did Mr. James give you orders to open his correspondence?' he then asked; for every one in the office had such a high opinion of Stella that they would not have been surprised at any token of trust, and this occurred to the head-clerk as the possible explanation.

'Oh no, I do not want to open them,' said Stella, colouring and looking embarrassed.

They were standing just within the door of the large general office; but the head-clerk, after glancing at the other clerks, several of whom had arrived and were listening with curiosity, stepped outside the door, and, leading the way to Stella's office, said, 'May I speak to you for a moment, Miss Wharton?'

Stella, with her proudest and coldest manner, said, 'Yes.'

The man entered and shut the door. He still had the packet of letters in his hand as he said, 'Excuse me, Miss Wharton, but I do not quite understand what you want.'

'I wanted Mr. Jones's letters; the letters addressed to Mr. James Jones, the junior partner,' replied Stella.

'By whose authority do you ask? I am sorry to appear rude; but, you see, this is a serious matter. I should not like to refuse a request of yours, as the firm have a very high opinion of you, and, I know, trust you implicitly; but it is against all rules and regulations to give the letters of the partners into any hands but their own. Trade secrets, you know, Miss Wharton,' he wound up, with a smile.

Stella wished she had never asked for the letters, and replied in her coldest voice, 'I did not know it was against the rules. I have not Mr. James Jones's authority to ask for his correspondence, and of course I do not wish you to give it to me. I will wait till he comes, thank you;' and, so saying, she uncovered her typewriter as a sign that the conversation was at an end.

But the head-clerk stood there perplexed. Why had she asked for the letters? Ought he to give them? Would Mr. James be annoyed if he refused them? 'If you think Mr. James would wish you to have them'——he began doubtfully.

But Stella cut him short. 'It is of no consequence, thank you,' she said.

The head-clerk still lingered. 'Is it some special letter'——he began.

Stella interrupted him. 'That is my business,' she said curtly.

'I only thought you might have some letter that you were expecting which wanted answering,' he said, half-offended, for Stella's manner was not conciliatory.

'No, thank you; I will wait until Mr. James comes,' she repeated.

It was evidently no good talking to Stella, whom the head-clerk designated to himself a haughty young woman. And, vexed that this first encounter with her should have been such an unfortunate one, he went away, but decided to take counsel with one of the other heads of the firm if he should arrive first; or, if not, to see Mr. James and make his peace with him, if necessary, before Stella made any complaint.

As fortune would have it, the senior partner, Mr. Baines, arrived soon after, and to him the head-clerk took his tale.

Mr. Baines heard him in silence. 'Mr. James says she's a very good clerk, and I should imagine she is trustworthy; but one never knows. I've never seen the young lady myself. They say she is good-looking and very proud,' he remarked at last.

'She is both, sir; in fact, she's the prettiest young lady I've ever seen in my life. But proud!—proud isn't the word for it; she positively freezes you up. She looked so odd when I asked her why she wanted the letters that, upon my word, I didn't half like it; one never knows with women, not the best of them, sir,' said the head-clerk.

Mr. Baines laughed. 'Anyway, I should not worry about it; you did quite right not to give the letters to her, and if Mr. James says anything to me about it I shall take your part. If he had wished her to open his correspondence he should have given her his written authority; it would never do if any clerk who liked could ask for our letters, and so I shall tell him,' he declared.

The head-clerk went away, and hoped that he had done right. And Stella waited, with what patience she could, for Mr. James Jones's arrival, which was not until half-past ten, when she heard his step along the passage—there was no mistaking it, because it was so light and springy, the step of a man who loved and lived as much as was possible in the country. In fact, Stella had owned to herself that if she had met him in society she should have taken him for a country gentleman or a sailor, certainly not for a business man, which he clearly was from choice, since Mrs. Ryan said that he was very rich, and that he could retire from business to-morrow.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE JUNIOR PARTNER.

Some months later it would have seemed impossible to Stella that she had worked herself into a state about such a trifle as a foolish letter from Vava to the junior partner, which, as she owned to herself, said nothing but the truth, for she knew she was stiff and proud, and that poverty made her stiffer and prouder, and that Mr. Jones knew it, and was far too friendly with Vava to resent her familiarity. But this morning the one thought that possessed her was that she must get that letter whatever happened. She could never face Mr. Jones after he had been asked by her younger sister to put up with her stiffness because she was poor and could not help it. So when his step was heard she just waited until he was in his office and had time to take off his hat and coat, and then she knocked at the door.

There was a murmur of voices within, and then the head-clerk opened the door, and said to Mr. Jones, 'Miss Wharton, sir.'

'Oh come in, Miss Wharton. I am late this morning, and your letters are not ready for you yet,' he replied.

'I should like to speak to you before you open them, if you please,' she said.

'Certainly, come in and sit down.—I'll see you in a few minutes, Leighton,' he added to the head-clerk.

'Excuse me, sir, but I want to speak to you too, and perhaps my twenty-five years' service may give me the right of precedence,' said Mr. Leighton, who was not very tactful.

'Not of a lady, Leighton. I expect your business can wait,' said Mr. Jones, turning civilly to Stella.

'I'm afraid it can't, sir; it has to do with Miss Wharton'——he began.

Stella had always thought the junior partner one of the easiest-going and most good-tempered of men, and she was startled by the look of anger that came into his face and his stern voice as he replied, 'You can have nothing to do with this

lady. I thought I made that understood.—I hope you have not been annoyed in any way?' he continued to Stella.

But Stella, though she was annoyed with the senior clerk for his persistence, and rather angry that he should be there to complain of her, was too just not to know that it was her own fault, and she said in her proud way, 'Not in the least, thank you. On the contrary, I am afraid I annoyed your clerk by asking for your letters. I did not know it was against the rules.'

'So it is, Mr. Jones, without your authority,' began Mr. Leighton, anxious to defend himself.

But Mr. Jones cut him short. 'It's all right, Leighton; I quite understand how the mistake arose. Miss Wharton wished to get on with her letters; and, knowing she has our complete confidence, she thought she could ask for such a simple thing. If she ever makes any request in future, remember she has my authority,' he said.

Mr. Leighton left the room with a 'Very good, sir.' But he was far from thinking that it was very good, and might have been heard muttering in his own room about a 'pretty face' being the very mischief in a City office, and a nice thing for them all if she was to be allowed to ask for what she liked, and have it too. 'A proud minx!' he wound up viciously.

Meanwhile, Stella, being left with the junior partner, began to explain. 'It was not your business correspondence I wished to see, Mr. Jones, but a private letter.' She stopped, for really it sounded very odd; and then she continued, 'May I just look at the addresses of the letters, please?'

'Certainly,' said Mr. Jones, handing her his letters, with a perfectly grave and business-like face. Not a sign of surprise nor annoyance at this truly extraordinary request was to be seen on his face, nor even a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

Stella took the letters and looked them through; but in vain! Vava's letter was not amongst them! She looked a second time, and then handed them back, with a worried air, to Mr. Jones, who apparently waited for an explanation, which Stella did not find easy to give. She could not understand the non-arrival of the letter, unless, indeed, Vava had addressed it wrongly. Then it occurred to her that it might have been delayed and come by the next post; and even as the thought passed through her mind a clerk brought in some more letters.

'You might open those to save time, as we are late to-day, while I go through these,' said the junior partner, seeing that Stella was not ready with an explanation.

But neither among this pile was there one with Vava's childish handwriting. If Stella had not herself seen the letters delivered she would have thought that Mr. Jones might have received the letter and hidden it from her; but she saw them in the head-clerk's hands when she came in, and watched him lay them on the desk before the junior partner. Still, there was just a chance that it had been taken before she came in, being a very unbusiness-like letter, and likely to have been noticed and put on the top, and she felt she must put her mind to rest; so she asked, 'Excuse me, Mr. Jones, but are these all the letters that have arrived this morning?'

'To the best of my knowledge, yes; at least, they are all that I have received,' he replied; but still he did not ask why.

And, for the life of her, Stella could not get herself to tell him why, but began mechanically opening the letters and reading them without taking in what they were about, until, with a start, it dawned upon her that she was reading a private letter of invitation from some people she knew. She gave an exclamation of surprise and annoyance at her carelessness, which made Mr. Jones look up.

'I beg your pardon, I did not think of what I was doing,' she said, handing him the letter.

'Oh that's all right; there's nothing private in that. Rothery often writes to me here; he says he has a better chance of being answered,' he observed.

Lord Rothery was a neighbour, and had been a great admirer of Stella, and he was a friend of the junior partner. Wonders would never cease! Stella was perturbed at the information, for the letter said that he should be up in town that day, and was coming to see Mr. Jones in his office to fix up dates for their yachting.

'I know—I knew Lord Rothery,' she said at last in desperation, for she felt that she could not meet him in Mr. Jones's office.

'Ah, yes, of course, he was a neighbour of yours. I am sure he will be delighted to meet you again, Miss Wharton,' said the junior partner politely.

'But I don't want to meet him!' Stella exclaimed impulsively, and then stopped.

This morning was going all wrong; she had meant to be very polite, but more reserved than ever, and here she was, on the contrary, having more conversation with her employer than she had had all the time she had been with him.

Mr. Jones seemed to understand at once; and, in spite of herself, Stella could not help being grateful to him. 'In that case I had better come and dictate my letters to you in your room, for Rothery has a light-hearted way of bursting in upon me without waiting to be announced; he won't take my business seriously, and persists that I come here for amusement, as I can't want to make more money,' he says.

But when they were in her room, and she had taken down all her notes, and Mr. Jones got up to go, she summoned up all her courage and said, 'I wish to explain to you that my little sister wrote you a foolish letter on Saturday, and that I would rather you did not read it.'

'So you meant to abstract it from my letters?' he said, looking at her very straight.

But Stella lifted her head, and looked back just as straight as she replied, 'I meant to do no such thing. I simply meant to give you the letter, which I should know by the handwriting, and ask you as a gentleman not to read it.'

A gleam came into James Jones's eyes as she said this; but he replied quietly, 'I think you might trust me, Miss Wharton, as a gentleman, not to take any notice of what a child like Vava said. You know, or rather you don't know, that business men can behave honourably and be gentlemen as well as the bluest-blooded among you.'

'I hope I have not implied the contrary, and I do not suppose you would pay any attention to what Vava said; but I should be very much obliged, all the same, if you would give me the letter unopened,' remarked Stella.

'I am afraid that is impossible,' he said gravely.

'Impossible!' said Stella, and then her pride and anger got the better of her. 'I fail to see why it is impossible, nor why you should persist in wishing to read a letter which I tell you I did not wish my sister to write to you. If it is some mistaken sense of loyalty to Vava, I may as well tell you that she has told me what was in it, and knows that I am asking for it back unread,' she said.

Mr. Jones looked undecided for a moment, and then he observed, 'I am sorry that

she told you the nonsense she wrote, and I am very sorry that you have taken it so seriously. I would not refuse a request of yours for the world, Miss Wharton, and I only wish I could make your life here less distasteful to you'——he began.

Stella interrupted him. 'Then why not promise to give me the letter when it comes, without reading it?' she said eagerly.

Mr. Jones thought if Stella had been pretty before she had never looked so beautiful as she did at this moment, as she laid aside her pride for a moment, to plead for the unlucky letter. He would have given a good deal to have been able to gratify her. 'Miss Wharton,' he said, 'you really are exaggerating this matter, and, if you will excuse my speaking plainly, you are not very just or polite to myself in objecting to my receiving a friendly letter from your little sister. After all, I am not a cad or such an objectionable person that you need mind her writing foolish confidences to me. I hope you will believe that I shall in no way take advantage of them?'

'That is not the point; but as you refuse to return me the letter I have only one course open to me, and that is to resign my post in your office,' said Stella, looking very white and angry.

'I have no wish to keep you here against your will, and as I am so obnoxious to you perhaps you will be happier in another office; and, as it happens, I know of a post that is vacant, and that you can have on my recommendation. You will allow me to say that we shall regret your departure very much, for it will be difficult to replace you,' he observed, and left the room.

Stella sat for a moment doing nothing; then she took up her letters and began transcribing them, and so the morning passed away, and she thought she had never passed such a miserable one. On her way to lunch she took her letters to the junior partner's room and knocked at his door; but instead of his usual cheery, 'Come in!' he came hastily to the door, and, only opening it a few inches, took the letters with a polite 'Thank you.'

And as she turned away, Stella heard Lord Rothery's hearty laugh, and she understood Mr. Jones's thought for her, and felt a little ashamed of herself; but stay there after his refusal of her request she could not, and she thought sadly of having to face strangers again in a new office, and wondered whether she would receive as much consideration there as she had done at Baines, Jones & Co.'s, and she could not help thinking that it had been very kind of the junior partner to assure her of another berth immediately on leaving him. 'He knows I should miss

the money,' she said bitterly to herself.

However, that afternoon when she went to his room he was as civil as ever, though very grave. He said nothing about Lord Rothery, nor about her leaving until she was going out of the room, and then he observed, 'I would rather you had not known this, Miss Wharton, and I am sorry your sister told you what she had written. Of course I should have returned the letter if it had been possible; I certainly wouldn't have read it if I had known what you feel about it.'

'I really don't understand. I made it clear this morning; but since you have read it there is no more to be said,' she replied in tones of scorn.

'It is very easy to understand; the letter arrived on Saturday afternoon, and I happened to be here and opened it. I only laughed, and liked the child better for her openness. I have it here; you can take it and read it if you like, unless you will do me the honour to believe that there is nothing in it which makes me respect either of you less, and to let me keep the letter.'

Stella struggled with many emotions during this speech, and then she said in a subdued voice, 'Pray, keep it,' and turned to leave the room.

'And may we consider your resignation withdrawn?' he asked.

'Certainly,' said Stella, and she could not help feeling somehow that she had made herself very ridiculous, and it gave her an unwonted feeling of humility as she went home, which Vava's conversation did not help to allay.

'Well,' was her greeting, 'what did Mr. Jones say?'

'He got the letter on Saturday afternoon, so I was too late to prevent his opening it,' Stella replied.

'O-oh! But you needn't really mind, Stella; he would not think any the less of you for it,' she observed.

'He was very polite about it,' said Stella in a reserved tone.

Vava looked inquiringly at her sister. 'I hope you were polite, because he's a most awfully nice man to be with, and you don't half-appreciate it,' she said with her usual candour.

And then Doreen, who was buying a book at the bookstall, joined them, and the subject was dropped, to Stella's relief; and Vava, who would have liked to know what Mr. Jones said, finding her curiosity was not to be gratified by Stella,

privately made up her mind to ask Mr. Jones on Saturday when he helped her with her algebra.

What satisfaction she got out of him will be told later on; but, though the storm had blown over this time, it was not the last quarrel between Stella and her employer, and Vava declared to Mrs. Morrison that it was 'no good, for Stella would never get on with Mr. James Jones, who really was the nicest man she had ever met, and quite a gentleman.' Whether this was a true prophecy time will show.



CHAPTER XX.

VAVA ON FRIENDS.

Both the sitting-rooms at 2 Heather Road were rarely used at the same time, for Vava learnt her lessons either with Doreen or with Mrs. Morrison in the kitchen, which, the girl declared, was 'the most comfortable room in the house,' and which, at any rate, was always spotlessly clean, and had a bright fire burning, and certainly looked inviting enough with the kindly, gray-haired woman sitting in the wooden arm-chair at the table knitting stockings for her 'young leddies' or mending their clothes. So that Stella would have been alone if she had not sat with the two others, who were only too glad to have her, not only because they both liked her, but because they did not care to be left alone either.

It was a sad fact which Amy had come to realise, that Eva no longer made a friend of her, but shut herself up within herself, and only opened out to Mrs. Morrison, and even to her she only spoke about her life before she came to London, since which, she explained, she had only existed. She never spoke of the present time.

As for Vava, she avoided Eva's society rather than sought it. Stella allowed her to be as much with Doreen as she liked, and she took advantage of the permission not only to do her lessons with her, but to invite her to learn knitting or hear tales of the Highlands from Mrs. Morrison, when, if she liked, Eva was free to join them, and was welcomed.

This seemed quite natural; but when Vava had spent two or three whole Saturdays with Doreen, for she did not often go to the City on that day now, Stella woke up to the fact that Eva was rather out of it. She and Amy were great friends, and though they always invited Eva to come with them on their outings, they knew that she felt it dull, for their conversation was all of books which Eva had never read. So Stella took Vava to task.

'How is it you never go out with Eva, Vava? She has two or three times had to go for a walk by herself, because you were busy, so she said, and then you go off a little later with Doreen!' she protested.

'Of course I go with Doreen; she is in my class, and we do everything together,

and I have more to say to her,' said Vava.

'But that is rather selfish; Eva is living in the same house with you, and yet you take no notice of her except at meal-times, and the poor girl is lonely,' expostulated Stella.

'She can go out with you and Amy. Amy was her friend before she came to live with us, why shouldn't she be friends with her still?' argued Vava.

'I am afraid I have rather taken possession of Amy; but I thought as you two were much of an age you would fraternise, and I find Amy's society very congenial,' said Stella.

'And so do I find Doreen's society very congenial, and you can't be friends with people just because it is convenient; but I don't mind asking her to come with Doreen and me next Saturday,' replied Vava.

Fortunately Eva did not hear this condescending remark, and accepted the invitation, and the three went botanising some miles out of town.

Stella elected to stay at home, as Amy had letters to write, and she was sitting alone in their pretty sitting-room when a motor drove up to the door, and looking out of the bow-window in which she was sitting she saw Mrs. Montague Jones alight. As she had been seen, there was nothing for it but to receive her visitor civilly when Mrs. Morrison ushered her in. But before the old Scotchwoman did this, she stopped to have quite an animated conversation in the hall with the visitor. Stella had never been annoyed with her old nurse before, but she felt quite cross at this odd behaviour. The motor was throbbing so noisily outside that she could not hear what they were saying, but they were evidently on very good terms with each other.

This may have helped to make her manner colder than usual; for Mrs. Montague Jones almost made up her mind to give up any further attempts to be friendly with this unfriendly girl. However, she had strong reasons besides kind-heartedness for persevering, and persevere she did. Fortunately Stella, who, to do her justice, was quite unaware of her cold manner, remembered that it was Mrs. Jones's kind thoughtfulness that she had that pretty sitting-room, and she hastened to thank her.

'Indeed we were only too glad for you to have it, as we have plenty of sitting-rooms besides that, and we had settled, my husband and son and I, that we would

not use your rooms at Lomore—yours and Vava's,' said Mrs. Jones.

The Joneses were showing very kindly feeling, which surprised Stella, who answered lamely, 'You are very kind; but it does not matter, as they are not our rooms now.'

'But we hope to see you there some day; in fact, you will always be most welcome to occupy them. At any rate, my son would not have them used, and insisted on the furniture being sent down here,' said Mrs. Jones.

'It is very kind of your son; but please explain to him that the place is no longer ours, nor have we any connection with it now, and that we are never likely to see it again. I hope you will not think me rude, Mrs. Jones, but I could never go to Lomore again,' Stella said; and she could not help the tears rising to her eyes, much to her annoyance.

'Indeed I understand that, and I feel that you must hate us, and if it were not that my husband is so taken with Vava and with you, if you will forgive my saying so, I would not intrude my acquaintance upon you; but I must give you his message. He wants me to ask if you and your sister will not come home with us and dine after the breaking-up at the City school on Friday week, and let us go and see *Henry VIII.* acted afterwards; Vava is studying it at school. My husband has to take the chair and make a speech at the breaking-up, and I shall have to go with him. You are going of course?'

'I do not know, but I dare say I shall be able to get away from the office. I am not a free agent, you know; but I will ask my employer's leave to have the afternoon off,' said Stella.

'Of course you can have the afternoon, and you will come back and dine with us, won't you—you and your sister? I should like you to know my son better,' Mrs. Jones begged her.

Stella thought this rather an odd way of speaking, as she did not know the aforesaid son, 'better or worse,' nor had she any desire to know him, and was sure that she could picture him as a young edition of his bullet-headed, commonplace-looking father; but she felt that she could not refuse the invitation to dinner, and accepted it with her pretty smile, which made Mrs. Jones forgive a good deal.

'My son will be very pleased,' was her reply, which made Stella almost repent of

her acceptance, and she was surprised at Mrs. Jones's continual and tactless references to her son and heir, as Stella bitterly felt. She understood, or thought she understood, that in a way Mrs. Jones and this son felt that they had ousted her from her inheritance, and wanted to make amends to her. 'As if they could!' she said with some scorn.

However, it was impossible to remain untouched by such kindness, and when Mrs. Morrison brought in hot scones she said quite friendly, 'This is in your honour, Mrs. Jones; nursie does not make scones for every one, and I don't think I should have been favoured this afternoon, as Vava is out.'

So Mrs. Jones went away quite satisfied with her visit, and told her husband, with a sigh of relief, 'She's actually coming; but upon my word, Monty, I doubt if the game's worth the candle. It's more exhausting to try and get on with that young woman than any number of haughty dowagers, and really I should be sorry for our boy to fall in love with her; it would be slow work having a statue for a wife.'

'She would not be a statue if she were a happy wife; the City has petrified her,' said Mr. Jones.

'I don't remember that she was particularly unbending at Lomore before the City had time to chill her,' said Mrs. Montague Jones dryly.

'No, but adversity had done that,' her husband reminded her; and he was as pleased as his wife at Stella's acceptance of their invitation.

But this was nothing to Vava's delight. 'And you actually are going? I am so glad, and you are going to see *Henry VIII*. also! Nursie must make haste and finish my black embroidered silk, and I must finish reading the play. Mr. Jones says it's splendidly staged!' she exclaimed.

'When did you see Mr. Jones?' inquired Stella.

'In the office yesterday, when I came to fetch you. He told me where to go botanising this afternoon,' explained Vava.

'Oh,' said Stella, 'that Mr. Jones!' and it flashed across her mind that the two Joneses certainly knew each other, and very probably were related, and that, also very probably, at the office Mr. Jones had mentioned the fact of Vava's interest in *Henry VIII*. and that she was going botanising without her (Stella), who would consequently be at home alone. Well, after all, it did not matter; they meant to be

kind, and she would accept their kindness in the spirit it was given.

'Do you know life's very funny? I mean, the way things happen are funny,' observed Vava, breaking in upon her sister's thoughts.

'What is that apropos of?' inquired her elder sister, smiling.

'Why, this afternoon. I thought it was going to be spoilt for me because Eva was coming with us for our walk, and then I come home and find a delightful invitation waiting for me—a motor drive, a dinner-party, and the theatre; and I dare say we shall go and have ices at some nice restaurant afterwards. Mr. Jones knows I love ices,' observed Vava.

'Don't be greedy, Vava; I think you are getting spoilt. Why should Eva's going with you spoil your walk? I hope Doreen is not making mischief between you? You liked Eva at first, I thought?' said Stella in a tone of reproof.

'Doreen is above such a thing; it's Eva's own fault; besides, I do like her, only I don't always like the way she talks,' said Vava rather hotly.

'She talks a great deal better than Doreen, as a matter of fact. What has she done to offend you? You had better tell me, for I think she feels that you avoid her, and it is very unkind unless you have some good reason,' persisted Stella.

'I haven't anything against her; it is just that Doreen and I don't approve of her,' announced Vava.

'Pray, what business have you and Doreen to judge other people?' exclaimed Stella. 'What do you disapprove of? I insist upon knowing.'

'You don't approve of her yourself, Stella,' said Vava.

'I don't remember ever having said so.'

'You said you did not approve of her buying that suite of furniture,' Vava reminded her.

'I beg your pardon, I said I did not approve of getting furniture on the hire-system for myself; but I never criticised Eva. I know nothing of her private affairs, nor do I wish to pry into them, and you and Doreen have nothing to do with them either; so if that is all you have against her you had better put it out of your mind.'

'It isn't only that. She never goes to church'——began Vava.

'Vava, I am ashamed of you! Eva may well say that churchgoing does not seem to make people better. What right have you to set yourself up to judge other people in that pharisaical manner? It is a most unchristian spirit. I know I am not a very good example, for I am not at all humble; but I think if we want Eva to go to church and be better we shall only do it by being very nice to her, and not by treating her unkindly and making her feel that we think ourselves superior,' said Stella very gravely.

Vava listened with equal gravity, but made no reply. If she had spoken what was in her mind she would have said that those were not the only two reasons for disapproving of Eva; but she abstained, and when she saw Doreen that evening she informed her that she was going to be nice to Eva.

'I think we are nice to her; we took her for a walk with us on Saturday, though she doesn't care a bit about botany, and wanted to be at the skating-rink or the pictures, and talked bosh.' She paused, and then added, 'By the way, does your sister know what silly stuff she talks?' she asked.

'No, I did not tell her. Stella is particular, and if she knew some of the things Eva says she would be very angry; in fact, she would probably not let me speak to her at all; and then I don't know what would happen, for we could not go on living in the same house like that,' remarked Vava.

'Anyway, I don't believe my mother would let me be friendly with her if she knew. I don't know what to do,' said Doreen.

'We must reform her,' announced Vava.

Doreen laughed. 'I don't think we should have much influence upon her. She thinks she's very clever because she has read some silly books which say that one should get all the enjoyment one can out of this life because it's all that's certain, and you can't argue with a person like that, who says you have a right to be happy, and that things are right that you know quite well are wrong, only you can't prove it. Father would be horrified if he heard her; he'd say she was dangerous.'

'She's only silly,' said Vava in a superior tone. Then they were both silent, until she exclaimed suddenly, 'Doreen, I have it. I'll tell nursie all about it!'

'She'll be worse than father; she's awfully strait-laced,' protested Doreen.

'Yes, but she's very charitable too, and she likes Eva. If any one can do anything with Eva, nursie can,' declared Vava.

'Well, tell Mrs. Morrison, then, because I think some one ought to know, and to tell her that she ought not to talk to us like that; we don't like it, and it muddles one up,' said Doreen with a laugh.

'It does not muddle me; it's against the Bible, and I'd rather go by that than by Eva,' said Vava; and that ended the conversation.



CHAPTER XXI.

EVA'S CONDUCT AND ITS SAD EFFECTS.

But when Vava told the old housekeeper of Eva's unorthodox views and sayings she did not seem at all shocked, or even impressed, by the information.

'Says we are put into this world to enjoy ourselves, does she? Well, so we are, and so we shall if we do what is right,' she observed cheerfully.

'But, nursie, you don't think Eva is doing what is right, do you?' inquired Vava, who was quite put out at this way of taking what the girl had been half-afraid to tell her, for fear the old woman should refuse to have anything more to do with Eva.

She was to be yet further surprised, for the housekeeper turned on her severely. 'And who am I, to say whether the poor young lady is doing right or wrong? As for what she says about religion, we know she is mistaken; but all you have to do is to refuse to talk about it. I never knew any good come of arguing on such matters, especially amongst young people. You can say a prayer for Miss Eva, and that's all you have to say,' she said, and turned to poke the fire.

Vava was silenced for the moment, and then her irrepressible spirits, which had returned at sight of her old nurse and the new home, burst forth, 'What will you do in summer, nursie? You'll have no fire to poke then, and you won't be able to change the conversation when you want!'

Nurse gave a smile of grim amusement (she rarely laughed) at Vava's shrewdness. 'I think I'll manage it without the poker, Miss Vava,' she declared.

At any rate, though she had not been very sympathetic, and did not seem to think it mattered, or that Eva was worse than any one else (or so Vava imagined), she had set the girl's mind at rest; and as neither nursie nor Stella seemed to think her an undesirable companion, she and Doreen must just invite her to go with them on their expeditions, when, if she chose, Eva could be very amusing, only that lately she had not chosen, or else had been too unhappy; for, in spite of all her talk about enjoying life, she did not look happy.

'All right,' said Doreen, with a shrug of her shoulders when Vava told her. 'I'm sure I don't want to be a Pharisee, and if we've got no poker to turn the conversation, as Mrs. Morrison has, we can use our tongues, and perhaps she's right, and that it would be no good even for her to talk to Eva; she's frightfully obstinate.'

The two Wharton sisters, it will be remembered, shared a large bedroom, which was in the front of the house, and the other two girls had smaller bedrooms at the back; while Mrs. Morrison's was half-way up the stairs, and here Vava always went to say good-night and get her 'evening text' from her old nurse, with whom it had been a practice ever since she had been a little girl to say a text to her, generally one which she had read that evening, to take to bed with her, as the old woman put it.

She had said good-night to the housekeeper, and was going to her own room, when she heard what sounded like a moan from Eva's room as she passed the door. 'Eva!' she cried, 'are you ill?'

There was no answer; but, as it seemed to the listener, a scuffle and a kind of gasp. Vava had a vivid imagination, and her mind jumped to the conclusion that this meant a burglar with whom Eva was struggling. Vava was no coward, and she was a strong athletic girl as well, so she did not hesitate a moment, but opened the door and burst into Eva's room. She stopped in amazement, for there was no burglar; but Eva, her face swollen with crying, was apparently making a survey of all her wardrobe and other possessions, for the bed, chairs, and floor were strewn with clothes, books, and all sorts of things.

'What do you want? Why didn't you knock at the door?' she inquired, looking annoyed and trying to dry her eyes.

'I am very sorry; I thought you were ill, or that there was something the matter,' stammered Vava, who wanted badly to comfort Eva, but did not know how to set about it.

'There's nothing the matter; I'm simply tidying up, and had a fit of the blues. Go to bed and don't say anything about it, there's a good girl,' replied Eva.

'Good-night, Eva. I'm sorry you've got the blues. Are you sure there is nothing I can do for you?' asked Vava.

'No, nothing. Good-night,' said Eva, shutting and locking the door after her

visitor.

Vava went slowly upstairs. The voice in which Eva had said 'nothing' made her feel miserable; but she did not see what she could do, and, even if the latter had not asked her not to say anything about it, she had not met with so much encouragement the last time she had talked about Eva and her concerns as to make her do so again.

After she was gone, Eva threw herself upon the bed, regardless of the piles of clothing already covering it, and gave way to a fit of weeping which seemed to do her good, for she sat up, and with a long sigh began to tidy up, which she had told Vava she was doing, though it certainly had not looked like it. And having put nearly everything away in the wardrobe or chest of drawers, she made up two parcels—one quite small, containing a gold bracelet and watch; and the other a large one, in which she put a very pretty silk frock. Then, with another huge sigh, she went to bed.

The next morning at breakfast Eva's place was vacant.

'Where is Eva? Is she not down?' asked Amy, who was generally the last, and now sat down to take a hurried breakfast.

'No, she has not appeared yet.—You might run and see if she has overslept herself, Vava,' suggested Stella.

'I wish you'd go, Stella,' replied Vava.

Stella did not look at all pleased at Vava's disobligness; but she was too dignified to argue, and getting up she went herself to Eva's room.

Amy looked with disapproval at Vava, who said, 'Eva did not like it when I went to her room last night.'

'I think she had a headache; she said so when I knocked at her door,' observed Amy.

'She is not in her room!' exclaimed Stella on her return.

Amy got up, looking disturbed. 'I wonder if Mrs. Morrison has seen her?' she remarked, and went to inquire.

'Yes, she's had her breakfast and has gone off to town,' said the old lady.

'Gone to town? It's only a quarter-past eight! Why has she gone so early?' she inquired.

'That I can't tell you,' said Mrs. Morrison.

'I shall come up with you; I do dislike travelling by myself in these morning trains. I can't understand Eva,' Amy said with a sigh.

It did not occur to Amy to ask the housekeeper if Eva had left any message or explanation for her, and so she got none. As a matter of fact, Eva had said as she went out, 'If they ask where I've gone just say I have business in town.'

Mrs. Morrison made no reply, nor did she appear to see the two parcels which Eva tried to hide as she left the house; but when the gate shut behind her Mrs. Morrison looked after her with kindly pity. 'Poor bairn, she'll learn by this bitter lesson,' she said to herself; and yet Eva had made no confidences to her, nor had Mrs. Morrison said anything to the girl about her private affairs. In fact, Vava was inclined to think that the old woman was blind to Eva's faults, for she seemed to pet her even more than the rest.

She would have been confirmed in this opinion if she had been down earlier; for when Eva came into the kitchen and asked in a hurried way if she could have a cup of tea, as she wanted to go earlier to town, instead of saying she ought to have told her the evening before, Mrs. Morrison said pleasantly, 'You can have your breakfast as soon as you like. What train must you catch?'

'The 8.5,' replied Eva.

'Then you have twenty-five minutes to eat a good breakfast, and if you will be so good as to sit by the fire and toast this bread I will have it ready for you in five minutes,' declared the housekeeper.

It was a cold March morning, and Eva looked very chilly, and perhaps it was that which made the kindly Scotchwoman suggest the toast and draw up a chair for her before the bright kitchen fire, for as a matter of fact she generally made it on the toaster.

Eva was only too glad to sit close to the fire and watch the good woman moving so quietly about and yet getting everything so quickly. 'Let me have it here, may I?' she cried impulsively, for the old woman's presence and her motherly attentions soothed the girl.

'If you wish. I doubt if the sitting-room is very warm yet, so I'll put your tray on this table near the fire, and you'll get well-warmed before you go out, and that's the secret of not taking chills,' remarked the old woman as she put a plate of crisp bacon on the tray and a hot roll beside it.

'You are a lovely cook, Mrs. Morrison,' said Eva. 'When I'm rich I'd like you to live with me.'

'If you want to be rich when you are old you must save when you are young. I'm thinking of buying you all money-boxes and putting into them all the money I save for you every week,' she observed, for she was given the housekeeping money every week, on Saturday, and after putting aside for the rent, the rest was left with her to do as she thought best; and on the next Saturday she accounted for it to Stella and Amy, who, she insisted, must go into the accounts and see how it all went, and to their astonishment and delight there was always a small balance, which they left with the housekeeper for emergencies.

'I don't know how you manage to save anything. I couldn't. In fact, I can't live on what I earn. If I don't get a rise I don't know what I am to do,' said Eva.

'But you have more than my young lady, so you told me; if she can live on it, why can't you?' objected the housekeeper.

'Because I am extravagant, I suppose; but I can't, and there's the end of it,' said Eva.

'Nay, my bairn, that's not the end of it; the end of it is a very bad one—debt and dishonesty, for they are the same thing to me—if one does not try to put a better end to it; and, I'm sure, you would not keep in debt, would you? But there, it's no time for such conversation at this hour, when you ought to be eating a good breakfast before going out to earn an honest livelihood. Have a piece more bacon, Miss Eva; it's hot and will keep you going till dinner-time—you've a long morning before you, remember,' urged the housekeeper.

Then she made up a little parcel with Eva's lunch, for she declared it was extravagant to pay sixpence a day for dinner when she could always give them pies or sandwiches to eat at midday, and cook them a nice hot dinner in the evening.

Eva did not say anything, but though she was quiet she looked less miserable than she had done when she came down. That day she did not go to the

Enterprise Club, where they ate their cold lunch or had the pies heated if they liked; and when Amy rang her up on the telephone she said she was lunching with a friend. Nor did she come home by the same train as Amy, who even waited for the next, and then gave her up in despair.

'What happened to you, Eva?' asked Stella. Neither Amy nor Vava cared or dared to question her when she did come in, looking very tired and with dark rims round her eyes.

'I missed my train,' she replied, throwing herself into a chair in an attitude of utter exhaustion.

'You must have missed two trains,' said Amy.

'Yes, I did; I saw the second one go out of the station as I came in; the office clock must have been slow,' observed Eva.

'I should not trust to the office clock,' said Stella.

'I thought you said your watch had never lost a minute since you had had it,' remarked Vava.

It seemed an innocent enough remark; but Eva flushed crimson, and said, 'I wish you would not worry me like this. I suppose I can miss my train without all this fuss?' Then she got up and left the room, and they noticed that she had not her wrist-watch on.

No one made any remark upon her conduct, and at dinner they tried to cheer her up by being very cheerful themselves; but the effort proved a vain one. After a rather depressing meal, Eva got up and went to bed, as she said; at all events, she retired to her room. Vava went off to do her lessons with Doreen, and Amy and Stella were left together.

'Stella, what are we to do? We can't let her go on like this!' cried Amy.

'I don't see what we are to do. Of course it is easy to see that something is upsetting her, and I suppose it is the payment for that furniture; but I do not think she is in the mood to be spoken to about it. We must just wait until she says something herself, and be as nice to her as we can meanwhile,' was Stella's advice.

'I am so afraid she will get into more and more trouble; this friend, whoever she

is, with whom she lunched to-day has not a good influence upon her. I always notice that she propounds some of her reckless ideas after she has been with her, and I have no doubt it was she who persuaded her to buy that wretched furniture, which is far too large for her room,' said Amy.

'She must buy her own experience, as nursie says; and, by the way, she told me the other day not to worry about Eva, as she would come all right, for her heart was in the right place,' said Stella.

'One consolation is that she is going to her old home for Easter, and I am hoping that seeing her old friends will bring her back to what she was when she came up to town. I am going there too. I know most of her friends, and I am sure they will do her good,' said Amy.

The object of all this solicitude had gone to bed, and was lying there reading a book she did not wish them to see downstairs, which engrossed her so much that she fell asleep over it and left her gas burning all night!



CHAPTER XXII.

DANTE'S IDYLL.

'We shall just have a quiet Easter here with nursie, Vava; you won't mind not having sea-breezes now that you have her, will you?' Stella inquired of her sister a week before the Easter holidays began.

They were sitting in the Enterprise Club waiting for Amy, who now had frequently to go home alone, as Eva was often very late, and had told her friend not to wait for her. So, as it only meant getting home half-an-hour later, the sisters had promised to wait for Amy to-day.

All round them were girls talking of their Easter holidays, and every one was going away somewhere, either to the sea or to the country, or to their respective homes, wherever they were.

Stella knew very few of them, and those only to say good-morning to; but they all turned to ask her where she was spending her holidays and how long she had; and when she had told them she had ten days, and meant to spend them at home, they were loud in their expression of surprise.

And Vava too seemed to be depressed at hearing of all these plans for pleasure; though when they asked her if she did not want to go away she immediately answered by saying of course she did not.

One of the girls, with less tact than the others, guessing that it was a matter of expense, remarked, 'I should go away if I were you if only for the day, if you can't afford more. But it really wouldn't cost much; there are lots of places where they take in business girls for as little as ten shillings a week, and it will cost you nearly that at home. I can give you some addresses if you like.'

'No, thank you,' said Stella with stiff politeness, and she was glad that Amy appeared just then, so that she could get out of the club-room, which had never been so distasteful to her before.

'All the same, Stella,' observed Vava, when the three of them were in the train, and although Stella had made no remark upon the subject, 'I should like to go

away for the day on Easter Monday. They say Bank Holiday is a horrid day in London, and you can get very cheap tickets to the sea on that day.'

'Go in an excursion train!' cried Stella in accents of dismay.

'You would not like it at all, Vava; it would be ten times worse than stopping in town. Besides, Blackstead is not town, and you will not see many holiday-makers down Heather Road; it will be quieter than an excursion train, with twenty people crowded into one carriage, and then spending the day at a crowded seaside resort,' said Amy.

'Oh well, I think it was only to say I had been somewhere; all the girls at school are going away, even Doreen will be away; but I don't really mind,' said Vava.

And so it was arranged, and the next week was spent in rehearsing a play for Founder's Day.

'Fancy, Stella, I am to be Beatrice in our play; only it is not called Beatrice, but "Beatreechee,'" explained Vava, pronouncing it, as she hoped, in correct Italian fashion.

'What play are you acting—Shakespeare's?' inquired Stella.

'No, Dante's, and the proper Beatrice has got ill, and they have chosen me, partly because I am the same height, and so her clothes will fit me, and partly because they say my face suits, though I don't think I am a bit Italian-looking. Do you think so, Stella?' Vava demanded.

Stella looked at her sister, and then remarked with a smile, 'No, I don't think you are; at least, not the type we call Italian.' But she privately thought the stage-manager had made a very good choice, for Vava had improved in looks since her arrival in London, and would make a handsome Beatrice.

'Miss Briggs says it does not matter, as none of us are Italian, nor look it; but that, as I have a good memory and can learn quickly, I shall be able to learn up her part. It's a lovely part, Stella, though Miss Briggs says it's not historical at all, and that Dante never said anything about talking to Beatrice, and she doesn't believe he ever spoke to her; but that's nonsense. How could any man write pages and pages of poetry about a person he had never spoken to?' demanded Vava.

'Quite well. Imagination goes a long way with poets, and I was just wondering

how you were going to act Beatrice. She does not say much in the poem, and then only as a spirit; so you don't want clothes to fit.'

'Ah, but it is all her life before she dies; the play begins at the party where Dante first meets Beatrice,' said Vava, who had the book of words in her hand and was studying it.

'But you, or rather Beatrice, are only nine years old at that party. How are you going to manage that?' demanded Stella, for Vava was a tall girl, and had grown taller and slimmer since she had been in London.

'We can't take any notice of that; you have no imagination, Stella. How can I make myself into a little child in the first act, and then be grown-up in the second?' she asked impatiently.

'Then I think I should not attempt such a play; it is making a parody of Dante's glorious poem,' protested Stella, who had studied Dante with her father, and thought this play presumptuous.

'It's not a parody, and my opinion is that it's better than Dante's,' declared Vava.

Stella laughed outright at this assertion.

But Vava was not crushed. 'You wait and see; it's got some lovely scenes in it, and the stage scenery is beautifully painted by ourselves—at least, in the school by the painting-mistress and the girls. There's the Bridge of the Trinità at Florence, where Dante meets me and makes a beautiful speech, and I have quite a lot to say to him there,' said Vava.

'You ought not to have,' interposed Stella, meaning from a historical point of view.

But Vava—who was 'rehearsing her play' to Stella more for her own benefit than to entertain her sister—was not at all pleased at this criticism, and replied irately, 'If you want to see your old Dante you'd better not come, for we are not going by it at all.'

'So it appears,' observed Stella dryly.

'How could we—horrid, gruesome stuff? Pray, how would you expect us to put on the stage a lake of boiling pitch, with a lot of people in it heads downwards and their legs struggling in the air? And who would come to see it if we did? I

wouldn't take part in such a horrid piece! Why, even the reading of it made me feel quite ill,' argued Vava.

'You need not pick out that particular scene; there are beautiful passages in Dante; but I do not think it is suitable for staging, and I can't understand why it has been chosen,' remarked her sister.

'It is called *Dante: an Idyll*; and, as I said before, you wait and see whether it is not splendid. I must go and rehearse this with Doreen now,' replied Vava.

'Is Doreen to be in the play too?' asked Stella.

'Yes, she's a Florentine painter named Giotto. It's very funny, but her features are just like his in his picture; and there's a Jewish girl in the school with a long face who makes up very well as Dante. Oh you will be astonished when you see our play; we do things in style at our school, I can tell you!'

'Don't boast, Vava; it's very vulgar,' said Stella.

Vava did not answer back as she used to do, but went off to Doreen, whom she found studying her part diligently. 'I'm so glad you've come; it's no use saying this play to one's self. I know the words all right, but it's the coming in at the right place and the pronunciation. I wish, if you didn't mind, you would just say these speeches over first, and let me say them after you, and see if I can pronounce them like you. I would like to speak well, but I can't twist my mouth into shape as you do!' she exclaimed.

'But we don't twist our mouths; that is just what you do that you should not. See, talk like this, Doreen,' explained Vava; and for more than an hour she sat patiently repeating the words and correcting Doreen, who had a quick ear and copied her way of speaking fairly well, until at last Vava said, with a sigh of satisfaction, 'That's all right now, Doreen; you pronounce those words quite nicely, and you say your speeches ever so much better than the other girls; one would think you were a painter yourself, you speak with such feeling of the beautiful pictures you are supposed to be painting.'

'I don't know much about painting, though I like looking at pictures; but I do feel what I am saying, and I think it must have been splendid to have been Dante's friend as Giotto was, and have been inspired by him. No wonder he painted beautiful pictures, and one day I will go and see them all,' announced Doreen.

'I never thought of all that; then I ought to feel more still, because it is I that

inspired Dante; but the worst of it is, Doreen, that I don't feel Beatrice at all,' Vava confided to her.

'How do you mean?' demanded Doreen.

'I don't feel as if I could possibly inspire a person like Dante; and, what's more, I don't want to,' she announced in a burst of confidence.

'You wouldn't like to have inspired the most beautiful poem that was ever written?' cried Doreen incredulously.

'No, I wouldn't like to have inspired a vision of such horrors,' maintained Vava stoutly.

Doreen could not help laughing at her tone. 'Then you can't admire some of my pictures,' she suggested.

'I like your little dog,' Vava replied, laughing too. This was an allusion to Giotto's famous sculpture of shepherds with a dog, on his beautiful tower at Florence.

And with this Doreen had to be satisfied.

'And you know, Doreen, they say I inspired him; but in this play I don't say anything very inspiring; it's Dante who has all the say, and utters all the beautiful speeches; I only have to try and look noble, and that's fearfully difficult and frightfully dull,' complained Vava.

'It's not difficult for you to look noble, because you are noble—in character, I mean—and you have a noble face,' declared Doreen.

'Oh Doreen! you horrid flatterer; that is just because you like me. I don't feel at all noble; but don't let's talk about that. Tell me if this is the proper way to move my hands when I am talking; the Italians gesticulate all the time they are talking, it appears. I don't know how they do it, for I have never been in Italy,' said Vava, talking rapidly, to prevent Doreen making any more such embarrassing remarks.

'You must wave them gracefully in the air, one at a time,' said Doreen, suiting the action to the word.

Doreen's action was anything but graceful, and Vava gave a peal of laughter.

'What is the matter?' demanded the former, stopping her windmill movements.

'I beg your pardon, but you did look so funny. I think I had better not pretend to

be Italian; I can't move my hands gracefully, and I feel awkward all the time,' she said.

'Luckily I have not to be graceful, and I have a palette and paint-brush in my hands all the time; that gives me some occupation for my hands,' observed Doreen.

'Yes, but I don't believe you ought to point at people with your paint-brush; the Italians are a very polite nation, and I do not think they would do such a thing as that,' commented Vava.

Doreen looked grave. 'But I've got to point, and how am I to point except with my paint-brush, or the palette, which would be worse? I have one in each hand, and I haven't a third hand,' she said, after consideration.

Vava laughed. 'I suppose you can put one of them down for a minute. Giotto did not paint all day long,' she suggested.

'No, but I am going to. I would not be without them for the world, and I should feel as if I had six pairs of hands. I shall do like you, and not attempt to be an Italian,' she announced.

However, the two of them were very enthusiastic players, and at the dress-rehearsal it was doubtful which was the better. Vava, of course was prettier, and acted well, but hers was a difficult part; and Doreen seemed to have become an Italian artist for the time being, and entered into the life and feelings of a Florentine painter of the Middle Ages, and her dress was an exact copy of Giotto's. It was as well that the girls had become word-perfect in their play before the last week of the term; for that week, at least, Vava would have found it difficult to fix her mind on it. However, it was arranged that the dress-rehearsal should come off before the examination began, so as to leave the girls' minds free for them, and the girls all knew their parts a week beforehand.

Vava gave herself up to preparing for her examination, and took up nearly two hours of Mr. Jones's time one Saturday morning in having her algebra explained to her; and Stella, finding she could not stop this, decided that it would be best to take no notice of Mr. James Jones's goodness, and treat it as a personal matter between him and Vava, and have nothing to do with the matter, which was also Vava's opinion; for, as she said candidly to Stella, 'You are not so civil to him that he would care to do you a favour.'

Afterwards she felt that her candour both to Stella and the junior partner had been rather a mistake.



CHAPTER XXIII.

STELLA'S PRIDE.

As a rule, an employer feels no diffidence in offering one of his employés a rise in salary; but Mr. James Jones found himself wondering how he was to tell Miss Wharton that the three months being up, her salary would be raised to two pounds. He always enclosed her cheque in an envelope, and sent it by the housekeeper with some other letters every Saturday morning. But this Saturday he wrote out the cheque for the increased amount, and tried to compose a civil note to inform her that the time for the usual rise had arrived. To begin with, he did not know how to address her. 'Dear Madam' sounded too formal, and he did not dare to say 'Dear Miss Wharton.' So he pushed the cheque on one side, and began opening his letters and giving them to Stella.

When she had gone, a knock came to the door, and Vava's bright face appeared.

'What a surprise; I thought you had given me up and got another mathematical master!' cried Mr. Jones, looking very pleased to see his young pupil again.

'Indeed I haven't; only I got lazy about coming up to the City on Saturday when there was a nice cosy fire to sit by and old nursie to talk to; but the examinations are next week, and I wanted to ask you to explain one or two rules to me,' said Vava, bringing her book up to the junior partner's desk.

'I shall be delighted; but I want you to explain to me first how to do something,' replied Mr. Jones.

'Me? But I can't explain anything you can't understand!' she exclaimed incredulously.

'Yes you can; you understand your sister,' he observed.

'Oh Stella'——began Vava, rather embarrassed; for Stella had requested her since the episode of the letter not to discuss her or her private affairs with Mr. James Jones or any one else.

'And I don't—I don't want to hurt her feelings,' continued Mr. James Jones.

'Oh well, I don't suppose you would; she says you are very civil and gentlemanly, and'——Here Vava stopped.

'Did she say that? I am very glad to hear it. What were you going to say?' he inquired.

'I think I had better not say any more. You know I got into an awful row about that letter, and nursie was cross with me too; so I really have begun to be very careful what I say now,' announced Vava.

'You need not be careful with me; still, I don't want you to say what you think you ought not. Now will you explain my difficulty to me? I want to write to your sister, and I don't know how to begin the letter,' he told her.

Vava opened her eyes wide. 'But she is in the next room!'

'I know; but I really could not say it to her,' said the junior partner, looking uncomfortable.

Vava looked at him keenly. 'I can't imagine why not; she's not so frightening as all that, unless you want to propose to her,' she added with a laugh.

Mr. Jones laughed too, although he coloured and looked fearfully at the door, as if Stella might by some evil chance be there. 'Would she be frightening if one proposed?' he asked in joke.

'I hope you won't, because she would not marry you, you know,' responded Vava.

'Thank you,' said Mr. Jones. And then he added, in a dry tone, 'As a matter of fact, I was not going to take any such liberty; I was going to tell her'——Here he stopped.

'That you didn't want her any more?' suggested Vava.

'On the contrary, that her services were worth more to the firm than she was being paid for them, and that her salary would be raised,' he observed.

'How jolly! Why can't you tell Stella that straight out? She isn't ashamed of earning money,' declared Vava.

Mr. Jones was not so sure of that. However, he so far took Vava's advice as not to write, but simply to send the cheque of the increased amount, and leave Stella to speak of it.

Meanwhile Mr. Jones set to work to explain not only one or two rules, but to go through all the term's work, and spent, not half-an-hour, but two hours at it; and Stella, who came in with her letters, could not help feeling grateful, and admiring the young man for his good-nature and the interest he was evidently taking in his pupil.

'Now if that does not bring you out first in the examination I shall be surprised, that's all!' he exclaimed, when, having come to the last rule, Vava declared that she understood them all.

'Then I shall have to give the prize to you,' she replied, laughing, and went off.

Now it happened that Stella did not open her cheque at all that morning, being very busy translating a long communication from a French firm, and on the way home she took it out of its large business envelope to put into her pocket-book, when her eye fell on the amount. 'Dear me! how stupid of Mr. Jones; he has made this cheque out wrong. If I wanted to cash this money it would be very inconvenient,' said Stella, who was very particular about paying all bills and accounts regularly every week.

'It's all right; he's raised your salary,' put in Vava.

Stella grew crimson with anger. 'How do you know? And what have you been telling him to make him do it? If it is because I couldn't afford to take you to the seaside, I may as well tell you it won't make any difference, and I am surprised at your complaining of not having enough money; it's just asking for it, that's what it is, and I never thought a sister of mine would beg!' she cried scornfully.

Vava's anger was roused by this injustice, and a wicked desire to tease her sister made her say, instead of denying the accusation, 'There was no need to beg; he says you are worth it to the firm.'

'I shall return it on Monday,' said Stella.

'Then you will be very silly. To tell you the truth, I wonder Mr. Jones puts up with you, and I should not be surprised if he gets tired of your nasty pride, and tells you to go,' remarked Vava.

Stella said nothing in answer to this impertinence. She was very angry with Vava; but now that she had time to think she felt that she had been too hasty, and should have asked an explanation from her sister, whom she could hardly believe had really asked for a rise; still it looked like it, its coming that morning. In a

different tone she asked, 'What made Mr. Jones tell you about this cheque? I thought I told you not to discuss me?'

'I didn't—at least, how could I help it; he began it, and I had to answer him,' protested Vava.

'You ought to have declined to talk about me. One thing is certain, you will not have the chance again, for you shall not go to him with your sums or anything else. Our relations with Mr. Jones are simply business ones, and I don't want him to think we wish them to be anything else,' said Stella.

'That's just what I told him, and I said you would not marry him if he asked you!' cried Vava impulsively.

Many a time during the following week did Vava ask herself why she did such a silly thing as to repeat that foolish remark; but at the time she had no idea of the trouble it would cause.

Stella stared at her sister as if she could hardly believe her ears. 'You discussed my marrying Mr. Jones with him?' she asked, red and white in turns.

'I said you wouldn't marry him, so it's all right; you need not go upsetting yourself,' she replied, half-frightened at the effect her remark had had upon her elder sister.

'I do not want to hear anything more that you said. I have begged you to be more careful of what you say, but it seems to be hopeless; other arrangements will have to be made.' And she relapsed into cold silence; but Vava saw that tears of mortification were in her eyes.

The girl made one or two attempts to speak to Stella, but without success, and they walked home in silence from the station. Oh how glad Vava was to have 'nursie' there, into whose ears she poured the whole story.

'You should not have said it, Miss Vava; of course Miss Stella is vexed at your suggesting such a thing,' said the old woman.

'But she does not know that I suggested it; she only knows half the story, and I can't make her listen,' objected Vava.

'You must leave her alone till she comes round; her pride is hurt, and no wonder. What I do wonder at is your talking about such things as marriage to a strange

gentleman; it's very unbecoming in a young lady of your age,' said the housekeeper.

But 'nursie' could say what she liked to her 'bairn,' who took it quite meekly, and did as she was told, and left Stella alone.

After dinner, at which they were all rather silent, Stella wrote a letter, which she took out and posted, not at the pillar but at the post-office.

'There now, she's written Mr. Jones a horrid letter, I'm quite sure!' exclaimed Vava to the housekeeper.

'It's none of your business if she has,' replied the latter.

'I don't know so much about that. Mr. Jones will think I repeated the conversation all wrong, and I'm certain she is sending back the extra money,' retorted Vava.

'You can't help that; your elder sister must do what she thinks right,' insisted the housekeeper.

'I can help it; I can write to Mr. Jones and tell him the truth,' declared Vava.

But Mrs. Morrison would not hear of this. 'You wrote once, and it vexed her; and now that she has forbidden you to go to see Mr. Jones any more you have nothing to do but obey, even if it is hard.'

'But he will think horrid things of me,' protested Vava.

'I do not think he will; but even so, you must abide by it. Dearie me, what bairns you all are! You are nothing but children, all of you, and making trouble for yourselves, as if there were not enough in the world without your adding to it,' said the good woman with a sigh, for she had taken Amy and Eva to her warm heart, and their troubles as well, and just now her keen eyes saw that there was trouble with them as well as with her own two 'bairns.'

Stella's walk had done her good, for she seemed more cheerful at tea, and spoke a few words to Vava, whose buoyant spirits revived at once. As Mrs. Morrison had said, they were all young; and when after tea Stella suggested a round game, they all joined in, and one would have thought to hear their merry laughter that they had not a care among them.

However, when Monday morning came, Stella came down to breakfast in her

indoor clothes, and seemed to be taking things very easily.

'Stella, make haste, you will be late for the train, and I must be in time this morning, because it is the examination!' cried Vava impatiently.

'I am not coming with you to-day,' said Stella quietly.

'Then why did you not tell me? I let Doreen go past, and I must run now to catch the train!' cried Vava, rushing off in a great hurry.

Stella certainly thought she had made Vava understand that she was not going to town that day; but Vava very certainly did not understand it, and remarked to Doreen, 'Stella is coming by a later train; she is rather vexed with me for something stupid I said, so I dare say that's why she did not come with us.'

'I'm sorry; she's so pretty, and I like to look at her,' said Doreen; and then, Stella not being there to look at, she opened her books and began looking over work for the examination.

The day went very well. Vava answered every question in the algebra paper, and was only uncertain about two problems, and she decided when she went to call for her sister to show her the paper and ask her if she might not give it to Mr. Jones and just tell him how much he had helped her. The last event was always uppermost with Vava, and her examination seemed to be of much more importance than her sister's annoyance of Saturday, and it was with a very bright face that she went to her sister's little office at Baines, Jones and Co.'s to tell her how well she had got on. She walked in as usual without knocking, and to her surprise found Mr. Jones sitting at her sister's typewriter, or rather the typewriter her sister had used.

'What! you, Vava? Haven't you washed your hands of me too?' he said rather bitterly.

'I haven't washed my hands of you. Where is Stella?' she inquired in surprise, looking round, and determined to be very careful what she said to-day.

'Don't you know then?' he demanded.

'Know what? Have you quarrelled?' she inquired.

'I have not quarrelled, and as it takes two to make a quarrel I suppose we have not; but your sister has left, and I cannot imagine why, except that I raised her

salary without explaining the reason,' he said.

'Left you! What reason did she give? When did she leave—just before I came?' asked Vava.

'She never came to-day. I had a letter instead, simply saying as there were only a few days to the holidays she begged to be excused from returning, as she wished to leave my employ.'

'Oh dear! it's all my fault,' sighed Vava, and she told the story of her conversation with Stella.

'Well, I am glad about one thing, and that is that I have seen you and had this explanation,' said Mr. Jones.

'But I ought not to be here; Stella said I wasn't to come and see you any more!' cried Vava, just remembering this fact.

'You did not come to see me—fate brought me to this room at this minute; but I won't keep you. I have written to your sister; but since you have explained matters I will write a different letter,' he observed.

'I do hope she'll come back to you,' sighed Vava.

'I doubt it; pride is very strong with your sister; but I hope we shall be friends in spite of it. Now, good-bye, don't miss your train,' he said, holding out his hand before Vava had time to ask how they could be friends without ever seeing each other.

As it was, she missed Doreen, who had gone by the earlier train, so she had to go home alone, a thing she had never done before; and she felt a little surprised and hurt at the indifferent way Mr. Jones had said good-bye to her for ever, as she believed.



CHAPTER XXIV.

BADLY BEGUN AND MADLY ENDED.

Looking back on that examination week, Vava declared afterwards that it was the longest week and the most eventful of her whole life—it 'began badly and ended madly,' was how she put it, talking about it to nursie, her confidante and comforter during this trying time.

She went home, feeling rather depressed, with an inward conviction that her sister's leaving Messrs Baines, Jones & Co. was her fault in the first instance, and she made a mental resolution to be more careful in the future what she said. However, Stella met her with no reproachful looks, but was calmly darning a tablecloth as if she had not just thrown up thirty-five shillings, or rather two pounds, a week, which meant a good deal to them at the present moment.

'You never told me you were not going to town at all,' was Vava's greeting.

'It is none of your business,' said Stella, who, though she imagined she had told Vava, did not wish to be questioned on the subject.

'All the same, you might have told me, for I went to your little room as usual to fetch you, and there was Mr. Jones typing his own letters,' retorted Vava with an injured air.

As it happened, she was getting the best of it, for Stella, who was not at all pleased at this news, could not scold her for going there; besides, it made the elder sister rather uncomfortable to know how her sudden departure had inconvenienced her late employer. But not yet would she own herself to be in the wrong. 'I hope you did not stop and talk,' she remarked.

'I asked where you were, and Mr. Jones told me you had left; but he would not keep me, he said, as he knew you disliked him'——replied Vava.

'Vava, what do you mean?' interrupted her sister.

'If you had let me finish I was going to say, "being friends with me,"' said Vava.

'Then you should talk grammatically; it is not "him being friends" but "his being

friends."

'Well, he isn't either, so it does not matter,' replied Vava testily, for she was very sorry about it all, and this made her cross.

The next morning's post brought Stella three letters. One was from the junior partner, which she opened first, though why it should have interested her does not seem clear, as she had finished with him and would not return to him on any account; perhaps she wished to be asked at least.

If so, she was disappointed. Mr. Jones's note was short and formal. Stella had begun her letter of resignation 'Dear Sir;' but Mr. Jones replied:

'DEAR MISS WHARTON,—I beg to acknowledge your letter tendering your resignation as secretary, which I accept in the name of the firm; also the five shillings, which you return under some misapprehension. I regret your departure, and shall find it difficult to supply the place you have so admirably filled. I also regret that you should hold the opinion of me that you do, and trust you will some day modify your views. I shall be glad to answer any one you refer to me.—Yours faithfully,

'JAMES JONES.'

Stella felt a distinct sensation of disappointment as she laid this letter down. The next pleased her no better. 'What have my movements in the City got to do with them?' she exclaimed involuntarily.

'With whom?' asked Vava.

'The Montague Joneses,' replied Stella, handing over to her sister the note, in which Mrs. Jones hoped that her change of employment would not interfere with her promise to dine with them next Friday, as it made no difference to them. 'Of course it does not,' was Stella's comment.

The third letter was a still greater surprise, and she gave an exclamation of pleasure as she said, 'I will come up with you this morning, Vava. I have been offered an appointment in the City not far from—my late office.'

'How quick! How did they know you wanted one, or your address? I suppose that is Mr. Jones, and I call it rather decent of him,' observed Vava, in a significant tone.

'As it happens, it was not Mr. Jones; it was that good Mrs. Ryan,' said Stella with satisfaction.

'How on earth did she manage it?' inquired Vava, who thought privately that if the housekeeper had got Stella this post she had done so by Mr. Jones's orders, and as it happens (to quote Stella) Vava was quite right; but fortunately Stella did not suspect this, or, as Vava well knew, she was capable of throwing it over, and the younger sister wisely kept her thoughts to herself.

The two sisters accordingly went up to the City together as usual, and it was only when they were nearing their destination that Stella began to look a little nervous

at the thought of again facing strangers, and to think with regret of the comfortable little room she had had all to herself. For one short moment she had half a mind to return to Messrs Baines, Jones & Co., the junior partner of which firm she knew would welcome her back; but pride forbade such a step.

Vava, who knew her sister's face well, guessed at her nervousness, and said in a pleading voice, 'Stella, please let me come with you; I shall feel much happier, and as if you had forgiven me for causing all this bother.'

Partly to please Vava, and partly because she dreaded facing a room full of young men who stared at her in too open admiration, she accepted Vava's offer, and went up the steps of Murchison Limited protected by her sister.

Mr. Murchison had not arrived, and Stella was requested to take a seat on a bench in the passage by a young clerk to whom she told her business. Up and down the passage passed a countless number of men, as it seemed to the two girls.

'Vava, you must go; you will be late for school,' said Stella, as the minutes passed and no Mr. Murchison arrived.

'I simply couldn't go away and leave you alone in this horrid place!' cried Vava.

Stella smiled at her younger sister's protective tone, as she said, 'But your examinations?'

'I don't care if I miss fifty exams; you are more important than they are!' exclaimed Vava.

An elderly gentleman coming in at the moment noticed the two girls in mourning, the elder smiling as the younger looked eagerly up into her face, and thought he had never seen a prettier picture. He came hastily forward, and holding out his hand said, 'Miss Wharton, I am sure, and this is the City schoolgirl? I am so sorry to have been late, but my car broke down, as usual with these machines when one has an appointment; but you should not have waited here. Come into my office.' He had such a kind, fatherly way, and spoke in such refined accents, that Stella was reassured; and the boy who had asked her to go outside wished he had been more polite when he saw the courtesy his master was showing to the two young clerks, as he had imagined them to be.

'You had better go now, Vava,' said Stella, as they entered Mr. Murchison's private office.

'Are you sure you are all right?—You will see that she is comfortable, won't you?' said Vava, turning to the old man.

A twinkle came into his eye, but he answered gravely and courteously, 'You may safely leave your sister with us; we will see that she is quite comfortable and happy.'

'Thank you,' said Vava, and ran off happy too.

A short interview sufficed to tell Stella what was required of her, and then she was shown into a small room by Mr. Murchison himself, who said apologetically, 'I am afraid it is rather dark and dingy, but we have not required it hitherto, and I am sure you will prefer this to being in a room with the other clerks?'

'Oh yes, and it will do very nicely, thank you,' said Stella with relief. Little did she or Vava dream that there was anything surprising in her falling into a second berth so easily, or in the treatment and consideration she received. Not that she would not have been kindly and civilly treated; but, as a rule, Mr. Murchison did not interview his clerks himself, nor did he hurry to the City to keep appointments with them.

If Stella had been in the chief's office later on she would have been enlightened about many things. As it was, she only wondered that she was needed at all; it seemed to her that the small amount of work she did might very easily have been distributed among the young men-clerks.

Mr. Murchison had just sent her in some papers to typewrite, and was leaning back in his chair deep in thought when Lord Rothery was announced.

'I hope I am not intruding, Mr. Murchison?' he began.

But the City magnate greeted him with a laugh. 'I believe you always say that on entering a City office,' he answered.

'Well, I feel I'm the idle butterfly among the bees, don't you know; but I was sent here this morning,' explained the young man.

'Not for a clerk's place, I sincerely hope, for I really can't find work for another superfluous person!' protested Mr. Murchison with a look of amusement.

'No, no; it's the last one I've come about,' observed his visitor.

'What! are you an admirer too? This promises to become complicated, not to say a nuisance,' said the old man; but he still looked amused, for he was a very kindly man, and Stella's quiet, ladylike manners, as well as her beauty, had won him.

'I admire her all right—I don't see how one could help it. But it's no go; she didn't admire me, and it seems Jones has no better luck. But he's a dogged beggar, and won't give up hope, and he has sent me to see that she is comfortable and all that,' he said.

'Oh yes, she's comfortable—at least, as comfortable as I could make her at a day's notice. And if you are going back to that happy young man you may tell him that it is more than I am, for I can't find anything for her to do, and I think he'd better send her work along too to keep her occupied,' replied Mr. Murchison.

'Oh that would never do; she'd spot something, and he says she must on no account guess that he has got her this place,' said Lord Rothery hastily.

Mr. Murchison put back his head and laughed. 'A City conspiracy to save the pride of a most wrong-headed young woman, who, as a matter of fact, does not deserve such consideration, after treating Jones so badly, leaving him at a moment's notice. It's really great nonsense, if you come to think of it. He wants her services, and I do not; but because she gets into a rage about nothing he must find her a comfortable sinecure. What am I to do with a lady-clerk? I don't want one at all,' he wound up.

'Jamie knows that, and told me to tell you he's sure it won't be for long. He's awfully sorry to ask such a favour, but it's a matter of life and death to him.'

'Life and death fiddlesticks!' ejaculated Mr. Murchison.

'I'm only quoting his words. He really looks very bad this morning; I feel quite sorry for him, and I'm awfully sorry for her too. Poor Stella! it's an awful come down for her,' said his lordship.

'I don't think it is any hardship to earn your own living, though perhaps she is too pretty; anyway, it's being made easier for her than for many a girl who is just as good,' objected Mr. Murchison.

'It's worse for her, because she's so beastly proud—always was as a child; but she's a good sort, and I only hope Jones will get his way, though I "ha'e ma

douts," as we say up north. He daren't come and see you, he says,' said Lord Rothery.

But Stella knew nothing of all this, and only found the day drag, as she had so little to do.

Vava too found the day long. She was half-an-hour late for school, and as she brought no written excuse, and her own was not considered satisfactory, she was not allowed to go in to the examination at all; and although she had said Stella was more important than fifty examinations, she was very disappointed to miss this one, which was history, in which she hoped to do well, as it was her strong point. However, she said nothing about this to Stella, who seemed depressed, on the way home. Although they had only been in the new house a month, things did not seem to be going very smoothly. Eva was like a thundercloud all dinner-time, and snapped at any one who spoke to her, until in desperation they left her severely alone.

'Everything's downright horrid, nursie,' said Vava, going into the kitchen after dinner to pour out her woes into the housekeeper's sympathetic ear.

'When night's blackest, dawn's nearest—not that I think it's a very black night; we must all pay for our experience, and you are paying at this minute,' replied the old woman.

'But I don't see why I should pay to-day! I had not done anything wrong. I couldn't have left Stella sitting on that horrid bench all alone, could I?' protested Vava.

'You are too fond of that word "horrid." I don't expect there was anything the matter with the bench; it's no good being too high and mighty in this world, and there's no disgrace or degradation in honest labour,' said the old housekeeper; for however much she might regret the necessity of her 'young leddies' earning their living, she was not going to tell them so, or put foolish notions into their heads; moreover, she thought they both needed a lesson in humility.

'It was not a pleasant place for a girl to sit alone, anyway, and you would have said the same yourself, and it was horrid, for sitting there made me miss my best exam, which was a horrid bore—well, a shame,' said Vava.

'It was no shame if it was the rules of the school, and it was that tongue of yours that took you both there to the new office, in the first place; but I hope it will be

a lesson to you. And now, my bairn, just try on these stockings; they will be cooler for spring, and I don't know if they are long enough or not,' she wound up.

Vava tried on the stockings, which she declared fitted, as nursie's knitted stockings always did. But next another unpleasant event took place, making this week the 'baddest and maddest' Vava had ever known; and to understand it the events of the day before at the City school must be related.



CHAPTER XXV.

UNDER A CLOUD.

When Vava had arrived at school, Miss Briggs, who really had nothing to do with her, although she had taken it upon her to write to Stella about her friendship with Doreen Hackney, told her to report herself to the head-mistress for being late.

The girls rather resented Miss Briggs's interference. She was not one of the form-mistresses, but taught certain subjects throughout the school, and had passed very high examinations; and, in her zeal for the well-being of the school and its pupils, she was apt to be meddlesome, as she was this morning, when, having nothing to do, she was walking about the corridors, and met Vava hurrying in late. Vava went by her orders to the head-mistress's room, but found it empty. As she was coming away she met Miss Briggs, and thought it her duty to tell her that the head-mistress was not there, and was then going to pass on to her classroom.

But Miss Briggs stopped her. 'Then you had better wait here for her,' she observed.

'I shall miss my exam.!' protested Vava.

'Where is your written excuse for being late?' demanded Miss Briggs.

'I have none. I went with my sister to her City office, as she did not like going alone,' explained Vava.

This explanation sounded very lame and unsatisfactory, Miss Briggs thought. Moreover, this same sister had written her a very stiff letter in answer to her warning against Doreen as a friend for Vava; and it is to be feared there was a certain amount of spite mingled with a desire for discipline when she replied, 'That is no excuse. You are too late to go into the examination, and you will disturb all the others. Your sister should have consideration for them, and you will stay here until the bell rings for recreation.' And Miss Briggs marched away.

'Here' was a corridor without any seats; but Vava took this command as meaning

to stay out of the classroom, and she wandered off to the playground, where she sat down on a garden-seat, and looked over the subject for the next examination, feeling very irritated at Miss Briggs's dictatorial manner.

Everything 'happened' wrong that morning. Miss Briggs, as she went back to her room, chanced to pass Miss Courteney, who had come to the door of the classroom to speak to some one, and Miss Briggs detained her, rather against her will, saying, 'Oh Miss Courteney, I met Vava Wharton strolling in just now. She had been to her sister's office instead of coming to school, so I told her it was not worth while coming in now and disturbing the others, and that she must wait till the bell rings.'

Miss Courteney looked vexed. 'It is her best subject. I am very sorry. Where is she?' she asked.

'In the corridor. Shall I say you will excuse her this time, and send her to you?' inquired Miss Briggs, who saw that, though Miss Courteney was too polite to say so, she had done wrong.

'I shall be much obliged if you will. I will speak to her about being late,' replied Miss Courteney, much relieved. She did not want to contradict Miss Briggs's orders; but she did not want Vava to miss her examination.

Miss Briggs hurried down to the corridor; but of course saw no Vava. She searched in all the empty rooms and in the large assembly room, and in her eagerness to find Vava she actually toiled up to the studio at the top of the building, but in vain. Then, feeling rather annoyed with Vava for her disobedience, Miss Briggs searched the cloak-rooms; and, not seeing the girl there, looked for her hat and coat under the name of Wharton. They were not there, and Miss Briggs came to the conclusion that Vava had gone off to tell her sister, her ideas of school discipline being elementary, in Miss Briggs's opinion. There was no opportunity of telling Miss Courteney, who was in charge of the examination, so she waited until the bell rung; for it never occurred to her that on this cold March morning Vava would be sitting in the playground.

But so it was. When the bell rung Vava joined the other girls at recreation.

'Where have you been, Vava Wharton?' demanded Miss Briggs

'Where have you been, Vava Wharton?' demanded Miss Briggs, who was in charge of the playground.

'Here, Miss Briggs,' replied Vava.

Miss Briggs unfortunately took her to mean on the premises. 'Do I understand you to say that you never left the school premises?' she demanded.

'Yes, I stayed here all the time till the bell rung,' said Vava.

'Strange. I searched everywhere, but could not find you,' commented Miss Briggs.

'I was here all the time,' repeated Vava, rather nettled at the young teacher's tone.

Miss Briggs went to report the matter to Miss Upjohn, who listened with a rather abstracted air.

'I will see the girl afterwards; at present I am worried about some examination papers which I put on the top of my desk and cannot find,' she replied.

'What papers are they?' inquired Miss Briggs.

'The Scripture papers for the Fourth Form; it is the next examination after recreation,' explained the head-mistress, who took this subject herself throughout the school.

'The Fourth Form! That is Vava Wharton's form,' observed Miss Briggs.

'Yes, she is in the Fourth Form,' agreed Miss Upjohn absent-mindedly. And then she exclaimed, 'Why, what are those papers on that shelf near the door?'

Miss Briggs went to look. 'They are the Fourth Form Scripture papers,' she informed her.

'I am glad. But how on earth did they get on to that shelf? I am sure I put them on this table; I never put them anywhere else, and that shelf would be the last place I should put them. Any one passing the door could easily see and read them without even meaning to do so,' remarked Miss Upjohn, looking puzzled.

'It looks as if some one had looked at them,' observed Miss Briggs with meaning.

'How? What do you mean?' inquired Miss Upjohn in surprise.

'I mean, if you did not put them there yourself some one must have meddled with them, and it looks to me as if that some one had taken them away to look at, and then hurriedly put them back as near the door as she could get,' explained Miss Briggs.

'Oh I don't think it at all likely! I hope not; I should be sorry to think there was a girl in my school who would do such a thing!' she cried.

'Then how do you account for them being removed?' demanded Miss Briggs.

'I can't account for it; but I would rather think that I put them there myself in an absent-minded moment than that they had been tampered with.'

'But you are never absent-minded, and you do not forget things,' objected Miss Briggs.

'I may have forgotten this; let us hope so,' said the head-mistress in a tone which showed Miss Briggs she wished to change the conversation.

Miss Briggs took the hint and said no more, and it is just possible that the matter might have dropped, and that a suspicion which had arisen in her mind might have died out, but for another unfortunate coincidence, which was as follows.

Vava, as has been said, had not learned to be subject to discipline, and constantly talked when going to and from class; and now, after the bell was rung, she observed to Doreen, 'I don't care if I have missed the history. I shall be first in the Scripture examination—you see if I am not. I can answer any of the questions they put.'

Vava took no heed of where she was when she spoke, and never noticed that she was passing Miss Upjohn's room, until Doreen said, 'Hush!'

Miss Briggs, who was at the door with the head-mistress, overheard the remark, and she looked to see what Miss Upjohn thought of it; but the latter only looked grave at the breach of discipline.

'You heard that?' questioned Miss Briggs.

'Yes. I will have to speak to her,' replied Miss Upjohn.

But Miss Briggs did not let the matter rest there. She said nothing more at the

time; but after school was over she went to the head-mistress's room, meaning to talk the matter over.

As it happened ('all wrong,' as Vava declared about all the happenings of this day), Miss Upjohn had the Scripture papers of the Fourth Form before her, and was correcting them.

'Miss Upjohn, excuse me,' began Miss Briggs.

Miss Upjohn patiently put her pen down. She occasionally found Miss Briggs and her zeal trying; but there was a spirit of comradeship among the members of the staff which is not often to be seen as strongly as at the City School for Girls. 'You wish to speak to me?' she questioned.

'Yes. Have you corrected Vava Wharton's Scripture paper?' she inquired.

Miss Upjohn was surprised at the question, but replied, 'As it happens, I have, and a very excellent paper it is; she has answered every question.'

'She said she should, on her way into the classroom, if you remember,' Miss Briggs remarked.

Miss Upjohn looked at the young teacher inquiringly, and then the meaning of Miss Briggs's words dawned upon her, and she said hastily, 'She is very well up in Scripture.'

'I would not have spoken of it but for this, Miss Upjohn, and it leaves no doubt in my mind as to the person who moved your papers,' said Miss Briggs; and she told the story of Vava's morning as far as she knew it, adding, 'She says she stayed in the building the whole time; but I know that to be false, for I searched it from top to bottom.'

Miss Upjohn looked very grave, 'I believe her to be the soul of honour. Surely you would not suspect a girl with such an open countenance as she has of such a dishonest act, and in a Scripture examination too?' objected the head-mistress.

'I am very sorry to do so, but appearances are often deceptive, or how should we be so often taken in? I must say it looks to me very like it, taking into consideration her speech before the examination, her excellent paper, the fact that she was alone hiding somewhere for part of the morning, and that your papers had undoubtedly been moved,' argued Miss Briggs.

Miss Upjohn could not help thinking what an excellent detective the young teacher would have made; but she was not convinced by her arguments, all the same. 'I think you are mistaken; I sincerely hope so, and I shall be obliged if you will not mention the matter to any one,' was all she said, and she did not thank Miss Briggs for reporting the matter to her; but long after the young mistress had gone she sat looking thoughtfully before her, while the ink dried on her pen and the papers remained uncorrected. Then, as if she dismissed an unpleasant thought, she continued her corrections.

And that probably would have been the end of that matter if Miss Briggs had not met Vava outside the school, talking eagerly to Doreen. 'I know I have done well in this exam, and the algebra. Mr. Jones helped me with the algebra, and in this exam. I knew quite well what questions were going to be asked, and looked them up while you were doing your history exam.; so it's all for the best, after all.'

'Vava Wharton,' said Miss Briggs sharply, 'how did you know what questions were to be asked?'

Vava was by no means a nervous girl, nor given to starting when spoken to; but perhaps the events of the past few days, or more likely the examinations, had excited her. At all events, she started at Miss Briggs's sharp voice, and stammering slightly, said, 'I guessed it, Miss Briggs.'

'That is nonsense. How could you guess such a thing?' said Miss Briggs, unbelieving.

'Indeed she did, Miss Briggs, for she told me one question she knew would be asked as we were going up the stairs, before we saw the papers at all; and it was great luck, for she reminded me of the answer, and it was the first question on the paper!' cried Doreen, whose idea was to prove to the mistress that Vava was not boasting, which was what she imagined her friend was being suspected of doing.

But it was, as it happened, a most unfortunate remark. Little though Miss Upjohn had encouraged her, Miss Briggs felt that she must go back and tell the head-mistress this latest information. So she did, though she was received very coldly.

Miss Upjohn heard her to the end without making any comment, and then she said, 'I am sure you only wished to perform an unpleasant duty in repeating this conversation, and I am obliged to you for telling me, as I will speak to Vava Wharton to-morrow and hear her explanation, which I am sure will be

satisfactory. Good-evening, Miss Briggs.' And Miss Upjohn held out her hand with a kind smile.

Miss Briggs went away far from satisfied. She thought Miss Upjohn very credulous and prejudiced in Vava's favour, and the unworthy thought came into her head that it was because she was a protégée of the chairman of their board of governors. 'And because of that she won't believe a word against her,' said the young mistress to herself. Then, being, as has already been seen, a most meddling person, she had no sooner arrived at her lodgings than she sat down and wrote a letter to no less a person than Mr. Montague Jones, who read it aloud at breakfast to his wife.

'I'm going right to the City school to get to the bottom of this, and give that "meddlesome Mattie" a piece of my mind,' he said in an annoyed tone.

'But the letter is marked "Private and confidential," Monty,' protested his wife.

'I'll "private and confidential" her. You haven't any right to libel any one confidentially, and I'll make her eat her words, daring to accuse my little Vava of looking at examination papers, and Scripture examination papers too! The woman must be an idiot!' cried the irate man.

'Pray be moderate in your expressions, Monty, and don't go up there storming at every one because they don't believe in Vava as much as you do,' remonstrated his wife.

Mr. Jones turned on her indignantly. 'You don't believe this humbug, I should hope?' he inquired.

'No, of course not, because I know the child; but I must own it looks suspicious, and if you take my advice you'll have a talk with Vava, and, without betraying Miss Briggs, get her to explain it all to you; there's some explanation, I have no doubt,' suggested Mrs. Montague Jones.

This was very sensible advice, and Mr. Jones was in the habit of blustering first, and then calming down and listening to his wife's shrewd suggestions; and this was what he did in the present case, though he went off in the car, which he had ordered round at once, muttering all sorts of threats against Miss Briggs for daring to malign his favourite.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MORE CLOUDS.

Vava meanwhile went to Stella's new office, and found her sister, with hat and jacket on, waiting for her. 'You have got done? I suppose they don't bring you tea here?' said Vava.

'No, we must wait until we get home. We shall enjoy a cup of tea with dinner all the more,' said Stella.

However, when they arrived at No. 2 Heather Road, the housekeeper, who had evidently been on the watch for them, came into the hall to welcome them, and, taking their umbrellas, said, 'It's cold, this nasty wet day, my bairns; come into the sitting-room and warm yourselves by the fire. I've the kettle boiling and some hot scones, if you'd care to have some tea.'

'Oh nursie, you just are the dearest darling in the world; we haven't had any afternoon tea. These new people are not as thoughtful as Mr. James Jones was!' exclaimed Vava.

'It is not really a necessity; we could very well wait till dinner-time,' observed Stella. 'But I must say I shall be very glad of a cup to-day; it has been such a long day.'

Mrs. Morrison looked at the weary young face from under her glasses with her shrewd eyes, but said nothing, and only drew the little table near the fire, took away the wet shoes, and went off to get tea.

'Nursie is a very comforting person, Stella, isn't she?' said Vava, as she held out her cold hands to the cheerful blaze.

'She spoils us all. By the way, I wonder where Amy and Eva are; it is time for them to be home, and nursie has only brought in two cups,' replied her sister.

The housekeeper coming in with the teapot at that instant overheard the last few words. 'The other two young leddies will be having their tea upstairs,' she remarked in answer to Stella.

'Are they in?' asked Vava, helping herself to a hot buttered scone.

'Yes, they are in,' replied Mrs. Morrison.

'What's the matter? Did they get drenched? Why are they having tea upstairs?' the girl continued.

'They wished to have it there, so I took it up,' observed the housekeeper.

'But I don't think you ought to spoil them like that. Why could they not come down and have tea with us here, instead of giving you the trouble of carrying it up to them?' remonstrated Stella, who resented the two English girls making the housekeeper run up and down stairs for them.

'I'm none so old as all that, and I have not much to do while you are out all day,' declared Mrs. Morrison, putting down the scones on the tripod in front of the fire and going out of the room.

'All the same, I call it rather cool of them making nursie run up and down stairs for them,' objected Vava.

'I expect they were wet through and had to change, and that nursie took the tea up without being asked,' suggested Stella.

'They'd be much more comfortable down here by the fire, I should think, than in their cold rooms,' observed Vava.

'Perhaps they have gone to bed,' said Stella.

Vava listened for a moment. 'No, they haven't; I can hear them moving above us, and—they have a fire in Amy's room; I can hear them poking it! What extravagance!' she continued.

Stella was privately of the same opinion, and she wondered at the housekeeper encouraging it. Moreover, it meant more work; but she would not criticise their house-mates any more, and changed the conversation. Soon after, Vava set to work at her books, reading over the term's work for the examination on the following day, and Stella decided to go up and see if Amy had caught a chill, or had any such reason for staying upstairs, or whether it was only laziness.

There was dead silence when she knocked at the door, and then a murmured conversation before Amy unlocked the door, and said, 'Come in, Stella. Eva has a headache, so Mrs. Morrison very kindly insisted on her lying down on my bed

and having a fire.'

It did occur to Stella as strange that Eva should lie upon Amy's bed and have the fire in her room; but as Eva had her back turned to her she thought the kindest thing she could do would be to leave her alone, so she said, 'I am so sorry Eva is ill. Mrs. Morrison did not tell me that, or I would not have come and disturbed you.'

'I'm not ill.—You'd better tell her about it, Amy; she'll have to know sooner or later,' said Eva from the bed in a muffled voice.

Stella looked with concern from one to the other. 'I hope there is nothing wrong?' she asked.

Amy made a sign to her to come out of the room, and they went downstairs to the little sitting-room before the former said anything, and even when they were sitting down in the two easy-chairs, which the good old housekeeper had drawn up to the fire, she did not seem inclined to begin.

At last Stella said, 'Tell me what is wrong, Amy—a trouble shared is a trouble halved. I suppose it has something to do with that wretched furniture?'

Amy gave a great sigh, and said, 'Yes. Oh if only she had consulted us! But it was only—thanks to Mrs. Morrison, who got the truth out of her—that she told me to-night; though, I am afraid, it is too late for us to do anything to help her.'

'I suppose the man is worrying her for the payments? Has she let them fall into arrears?' inquired Stella, to help her friend, who seemed to find a difficulty in continuing.

'It's worse than that; it's a dreadful business, and not a nice story; but it is that friend of hers who is at the bottom of it. The furniture has been bought in a false name, and Eva represented herself as over twenty-one, and signed a paper making herself liable for the whole amount if the payments fell into arrears, and of course they have, and it appears the man came down and interviewed Mrs. Morrison, and would have made himself very unpleasant if she had not overawed him. Of course she denied there being any one here of the name Eva gave.'

Stella was, as Amy had expected, very much shocked at this tale, but all she said was, 'I cannot understand the man's believing that Eva was twenty-one; she does not look more than eighteen at the most.'

'That was just what we said, Mrs. Morrison and I; but—and this is the worst part of it—she took the name of her friend and used her birth certificate, which this girl happened to have for some examination, and the girl actually went with Eva and identified her as being the person in the certificate.'

'Disgraceful!' burst out involuntarily from Stella.

'It is disgraceful, and now the man threatens her with exposure if she does not pay down the whole amount.'

'How much is it?' inquired Stella.

'Thirty-five pounds,' said Amy.

'That seems to me a good deal, even for that suite,' observed Stella.

'So it is; but he said it was credit price.'

'And how much has she paid?' asked Stella.

'Only five pounds, and she had to sell her watch and a gold bracelet and a silk dress to pay that, she says. She never could save out of her weekly salary,' explained Amy.

Stella remembered poor Eva's motto made out of their four names, and thought how very inappropriate a one it had proved in her case. 'Poor Eva!' she exclaimed.

'Yes, indeed it is "poor Eva!" and I don't see how we are to help her; we cannot give her the thirty pounds, and the man demands it within eight days.'

'I don't believe he can; besides, if she has not got it, it is not any good his demanding it; he must take his furniture back,' declared Stella, who, though she did not know much of such business, had a good business head.

'He declares the furniture is not worth the half now, and threatens to take the matter into court, and put Eva in prison for getting goods under false pretences.'

'Has she no relations to whom she could go for advice? Surely she cannot be alone in the world?' Stella asked anxiously.

'I don't think she has any near relations; her father was a very peculiar man, and, I fancy, had quarrelled with all his relations, and his wife's as well. I know none ever came to visit them,' said Amy.

'She must have friends,' said Stella.

'She says she would rather be put in prison than tell any of them,' declared Amy.

'Then we must consult a lawyer. I wish Mr. Stacey were nearer; but he may know some one in London who would advise us, though I don't know what is to be done about the money. I have not thirty pounds at this minute,' said Stella.

'Nor have I, or I would give it willingly; it is dreadful to see her. She may say she is not ill, but she looks ill, and she will be if this goes on,' said Amy.

Stella was very sorry for Eva; but she felt rather angry with her too, though her hard-heartedness would have melted if she could have seen Eva, who lay upon her bed looking the picture of woe.

When Vava came back, the three of them sat down to dinner, an especially nice and tempting dinner made by the old housekeeper, who managed to make tasty dishes, in spite of being economical; and her young charges, for such they may truly be called, made a very good meal.

'I'll take some up to Eva; I 'm sure this will tempt her!' cried Vava when she had finished her dinner.

Amy had already taken her tray up, and brought it back untouched; but Vava would not be gainsaid, and carried up some soup, which she declared Eva was very fond of.

'Perhaps she will take it from Vava, as she does not know anything about it,' suggested Stella, who thought that Eva might be ashamed, under the circumstances, of having any appetite.

Vava did not come down for more than half-an-hour, and when she did they saw that she had been crying.

Stella gave an exclamation of vexation. 'I did not want you to be told all this; you are too young to be mixed up with such disreputable doings. Don't bother your head about it any more,' said Stella.

'But I must, because I feel that it was partly my fault,' declared Vava.

'Your fault!' cried Stella, horrified.

'Yes, because Eva would not have been such friends with this horrid girl if I had

not been so unfriendly with her. She says she was so disappointed when she saw I did not care for her, and it made her take to this other girl,' said Vava.

'Eva ought not to put the blame on to you; no one need do wrong unless they choose, and it is very weak to be led away so easily. And what we are going to do about it I don't know; she has got herself into a terrible mess.'

'Poor Eva, she can't bear the sight of the furniture, so she is going to sleep in Amy's room,' announced Vava.

'I should not think Amy would care to see it either,' observed Stella dryly.

Vava saw that her sister had not much sympathy with Eva, and she had certainly brought trouble upon the whole household at No. 2 Heather Road, where they might all have been so happy if they had all done what was right.

As it was, Stella and Amy sat up till midnight, talking the matter over and wondering what could be done for Eva, and ending up after each suggestion by deciding that they could do nothing.

Amy crept up to her room to get out some things she wanted, and Stella stood upon the stairs to wait for her and hear how Eva was. Amy was some little time, and presently she came on tiptoe to the door, a smile upon her face. 'Just come and look at her, she is sleeping so peacefully,' she said in a whisper.

There was a bright fire burning, and it passed through Stella's mind that Eva's sorrow did not prevent her from making herself comfortable. As the firelight fell upon the sleeping girl's face she could not help thinking to herself that the miserable business did not seem to have made a very deep impression upon the culprit, for she was, as Amy had said, sleeping quite peacefully, as if she had not a care in the world, with a smile upon her lips; and that smile hardened Stella's heart against Eva.

'It's all very well, Amy, but she has upset us all dreadfully; and while we have been cudgelling our brains downstairs to try and find a way to help her, she goes happily to sleep and does not worry at all,' said Stella, as she accompanied her friend to her bedroom.

'I suppose she had worn herself out,' said Amy, trying to be loyal to her friend, though in her heart she had been rather surprised herself to find Eva asleep.

Stella did not say any more; but any idea she had had of asking Mr. Stacey to let

her have a little money to help Eva was given up, and she went to bed, pondering upon the easy conscience that some people had.

Vava had learnt her lesson from Eva's trouble, but Stella was too shocked with Eva to be as sympathetic with the poor girl as she might have been; and Vava, who thought her hard, remarked with her usual candour, 'The fact is, Stella, you are a regular Pharisee, and you'll have a nice tumble one of these days if you walk like that, with your head in the air, looking over the heads of everybody.' And then Vava turned over and went to sleep.



CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VALUE OF A GOOD CHARACTER.

Vava tossed and turned and went to sleep, only to dream of prison cells, in which Eva was secured by heavy chains, which she (Vava) tried in vain to break, and it was from one of these nightmares that she awoke in the morning to the sound of a laugh. Sitting up in bed, Vava listened, hardly able to believe her ears, for it was Eva's laugh.

'Stella,' she said in solemn tones to her sister, 'do you hear Eva laughing?'

'Yes,' said Stella shortly; but the little word said a good deal.

'Do you think she's in hysterics?' asked Vava.

'No, I do not; she seems very cheerful,' replied Stella.

Vava was very thoughtful; and when she went to the bathroom, Stella noticed that she did not stop as usual to say good-morning to Eva as she passed her door, at which her sister was rather pleased, for she did not approve of Eva's light-heartedness under the circumstances.

However, she greeted the girl kindly enough when they met at breakfast, and indeed it would have been difficult not to smile back at Eva's happy face, with a look on it that they had not seen since they had been at Heather Road. It scarcely needed Eva's announcement that she did 'feel so happy' to assure them of the fact, for she looked a different girl; 'and I don't deserve it,' she added.

There was silence when she said this, for if her three listeners had spoken their minds they would have cried in chorus, 'Indeed you do not!' As it happened, however, it was Vava, with her usual candour, who demanded, 'Then why do you feel happy?'

'Don't you know?' demanded Eva, looking from one to the other; and then, seeing from their faces that they certainly did not know the reason for her change of mood, she continued, 'I thought Mrs. Morrison would have told you.'

'What has nursie got to do with it?' asked Vava.

'Everything, she has been so good. She came up to me last night, and straightened things out in the most wonderful way, as far as they can be straightened, and I am going to keep them straight for the future,' said Eva.

'I am very glad,' said Stella; but though she wondered how the old housekeeper had straightened out this tangled web, she was too polite to ask any questions; nor, though they were burning with curiosity, did the other two do so either; Vava because she thought she should hear it from 'nursie,' and Amy because she decided that Eva would prefer to tell her when the two of them were alone.

Vava was disappointed in her hope of getting an explanation out of the old housekeeper, who, in answer to her questions, said, 'And what will it have to do with you, Miss Vava? I'm ashamed at your curiosity.'

'I don't call it curiosity to take an interest in your friends, and I want to know that Eva is safe,' said Vava.

'Oh if that is all you are asking, then I can answer you; she is safe from being punished for her wrong-doing except by her own conscience,' replied Mrs. Morrison; and with this Vava had to be content, though it was not all she wanted to be told, as the old woman very well knew.

Amy, however, fared better, and came out of Eva's room looking radiant. 'Stella, it is too good of Mrs. Morrison! Fancy, she is lending Eva the thirty pounds, and she is seeing the man herself; so we need not bother about a lawyer or anything!' she cried.

But Stella did not look at all pleased, and saying, 'Indeed!' she walked straight into the kitchen to have it out with nursie, who received her remonstrances very calmly.

'Don't you fash yourself, Miss Stella, dearie; I'm not throwing away my money, and I am not spoiling Miss Eva, nor encouraging her either. She will pay back every penny, and a hard time she will have doing it too.'

And with this Stella had to be satisfied. Mrs. Morrison was a woman of great character, and what she thought it right to do she did, without paying any attention to what people said or thought.

'I shall not be back to dinner,' said Eva as she said good-bye to the other three.

'Why? What are you going to do?' asked Amy anxiously.

Eva coloured slightly as she answered in a would-be light manner, 'I have some work to do at the office; we are working overtime, so I shall be late for the next few weeks,' and then she nodded and went off before she could be questioned further.

Amy turned to the sisters and said, 'I did her an injustice. I thought she was taking things too easy, although I was thankful to hear that she had been got out of her trouble; but this work that she speaks of is dreadfully tiresome, and all the lady-clerks refused it. She is getting very good pay for it, but it will tire her on these spring evenings.'

'I did her wrong too. I am very glad she has taken this work and is trying to earn extra money; she will feel much happier,' said Stella.

'Yes, and Mrs. Morrison has made her promise to bring her salary straight to her every Saturday, and just ask her for what she needs; and Eva says she means to live on two shillings and sixpence a week till she is out of debt,' explained Amy.

Stella gave a sigh of relief. 'Perhaps it has taught her a lesson,' she agreed; 'and it is a blessing that it has ended better than we expected.'

Then the three started for the City with Doreen, who, of course, knew nothing of what had happened.

'There's the chairman's motor at the school-gate,' exclaimed the latter, as she and Vava approached the City school.

'Mr. Montague Jones's, you mean? So it is! I wonder what he has come for? Something to do with the prizes, I expect,' said Vava, and she stopped to speak to the chauffeur, with whom she was a great favourite.

'The master's in there; I believe he's looking for you,' the man observed.

'That isn't the proper place to look for me; I go in at the pupils' entrance, tell him,' said Vava.

But Mr. Jones was not at that moment looking for Vava. He had been met by Miss Upjohn, who was very glad to see him, as she wished to speak about some school matter, which being soon settled, Mr. Jones began at once, 'And how is my little friend Vava Wharton getting on?'

There was nothing unusual in his asking this, for it was his usual question, and

the head-mistress replied with a smile, 'She is not very little, but she is getting on very well. I think you will have to give her two prizes, which is rather unusual for a girl in her first term. She has done two excellent examination papers.'

'Indeed! Which are they?' inquired Mr. Jones, who was wondering how he was to broach the subject of the Scripture papers, and get at the bottom of Miss Briggs's tale without betraying her.

'Scripture and algebra; the first did not surprise me so much, for she is exceptionally well up in Scripture, and we cannot take any credit to ourselves for the knowledge she has displayed in that subject; but she has made wonderful progress in algebra; she is a very clever girl. One has the beauty, and the other the brains—not that Vava is not good-looking, by the way,' said the head-mistress, correcting herself.

'Nor is the beauty stupid, by any means, though she is so reserved that it is difficult to get to know her or her abilities,' said Mr. Jones, who began to think that he had come on a fool's errand, and had better have trusted the head-mistress to manage her school without his interference. He was just getting up to say good-bye when there came a knock at the door, and Miss Briggs entered, looking very perturbed at sight of Montague Jones.

'My letter was strictly private, Mr. Jones,' she said.

'And so it has been treated, Miss Briggs,' replied Mr. Jones.

'Miss Briggs, excuse me, but did you write to Mr. Jones upon the matter we discussed yesterday?' inquired the head-mistress, looking very much annoyed.

Poor Miss Briggs looked very much ashamed of herself as she answered, 'Yes.' She saw that she had betrayed herself, whereas Mr. Jones had not done so.

'Since you have told Miss Upjohn so much, I think you may allow me to suggest that you should give us your grounds for suspecting my young friend Miss Wharton of dishonest practices, and let us try and convince you that you are mistaken,' observed Mr. Jones.

'Oh I did not say they were dishonest,' she protested.

'But I do,' he replied.

Thus put into a corner, Miss Briggs had to go through the whole thing again, and

a very bad time she had of it. Mr. Jones had not been a magistrate for nothing. He questioned and cross-questioned and argued till he had proved even to Miss Briggs's satisfaction that the very remarks she had overheard only proved Vava's innocence, as no girl in her senses would boast openly of knowing the questions beforehand if she had looked at them secretly, far less impart one to a friend, and that one a girl whom the girls had nicknamed 'Old Honesty.' At last Miss Upjohn and her visitor had the satisfaction of having brought Miss Briggs round to their opinion.

'I see now that I was mistaken, and I am very sorry about it, and I ought not to have written to you,' she said frankly to Mr. Jones.

'No, you ought not. Miss Upjohn is quite able to manage her own affairs; but I hope she will overlook your fault this time,' he replied with equal frankness; and then he got up and left the two ladies alone.

Miss Briggs looked so ashamed of herself that Miss Upjohn was sorry for her; but what she said to her young assistant no one knew, for the story never went any further.

Vava never thought of her unpleasant experience with Miss Briggs after that day, except to feel that it had done good instead of harm, for the young mistress went out of her way to be pleasant to the girl she had wrongfully accused, which Vava thought very nice of her, as it had never been proved that she had not moved those papers. Perhaps she would not have been so grateful to Miss Briggs if she had known that it had been proved to have been some one else.

The facts of the case were that another mistress had taken them by mistake, and in her hurry just put them back inside the door. Miss Upjohn was very glad to have this explanation, not that she doubted Vava, but because she thought it would show Miss Briggs how easily one may be suspicious without cause. And, if the truth be told, it was not till she heard this that Miss Briggs did quite believe in Vava's innocence. So that it did teach her a lesson.

Vava was called into the head-mistress's study that morning, and went in looking very hot and indignant, but came out smiling, and said to Doreen, 'It's all right.'

'What's all right?' demanded Doreen, staring.

'Oh I forgot you know nothing about it. Well, it does not matter; it was only something that was bothering me, and it's all right now. Miss Upjohn is a brick,'

explained Vava.

'I knew *that* before, and I'm glad whatever was bothering you is all right; you all seem to have had the blues lately at your place. Mother said she supposed you found a house rather a bother as well as a pleasure,' remarked Doreen.

'Oh no, we don't! Mrs. Morrison takes all the worry off us; she's a brick too, a gold brick!' declared Vava with enthusiasm.

'I never heard of a "gold brick,"' observed Doreen.

'Well, she's one,' said Vava obstinately, and they both laughed.

But Vava never told any one except her 'gold brick,' as she called 'old nursie,' of the bad quarter of an hour which she had had with Miss Briggs before school, when the latter had accused her of having seen the papers, and told her to go and confess it to Miss Upjohn. 'But that wasn't the worst, nursie; the worst was in Miss Upjohn's room,' declared the girl.

'But I thought she had the sense to believe in you?' asked the old woman.

'Oh yes, she was most awfully nice, and told me she had never doubted me for a moment; it was Miss Briggs that made me feel so horrid and uncomfortable. Miss Upjohn told her she owed me an apology, and she looked so miserable I felt as if I ought to apologise to her,' said Vava.

'And why would you do that? No one has a right to take away your character, and if they try to do it, and find they are wrong, it is they who should apologise. There's nothing so much worth in this world as one's character—never forget that, my bairn,' said the old nurse. 'You see how Mr. Jones and Miss Upjohn both believed in you, though I must say things did look black to a suspicious person; that was because they knew your character, and that it was an honest character. If that same tale had been told about a girl who was not straightforward it might have been a different thing. Be thankful for your head-mistress's trust in you, and always act up to the principles you have been taught; it will save you from many a pitfall or from the trouble a weak young lady like Miss Eva brings upon herself.'

'It doesn't seem to matter so much as long as I have you to get me out of it,' said Vava mischievously.

'Indeed it does, for though I might get you off punishment I could never undo

what you had done,' said the old housekeeper.

'But if I was sorry?' suggested Vava.

'You would be forgiven, but it would never undo it, remember that,' repeated Mrs. Morrison.

And Vava did remember it. At the moment she was thinking that Eva seemed to have got over her trouble, and to feel as if it were undone the moment the money was paid; but, as it happened, she was mistaken, and when she saw her come in night after night, looking tired out and black under the eyes, she began to understand that 'old nursie' was right, and that one cannot undo a wrong deed. Moreover, though she never spoke of it, Eva felt that she had lost her character for uprightness with her friends, and she bitterly regretted her weakness. But if the girl had but known it, they respected her more now that she was working so hard to repay Mrs. Morrison than they had ever done before, and Vava was only too glad to be with her in the short time she had free.

As for the furniture man, the shrewd Scotchwoman managed him better perhaps than a lawyer would have done, and she got back Eva's jewellery, which he had accepted in part payment at much less than their value; and her still final triumph was that she only paid the thirty pounds.

'So I made him take five pounds off the bill, and then overpaid him to be quit of him altogether, though it's a fine suite, after all,' said Mrs. Morrison when recounting her transaction with the not too reputable tradesman, who, for his part, was not sorry to have done with Mrs. Morrison, whose shrewd questions and business knowledge made him feel very uncomfortable, as did some of her plain comments on his behaviour.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

VAVA GETS A SHOCK.

The days flew by until the eventful Friday when there was the prize-giving, the play of Dante, in which Vava had the rôle of heroine, and, to wind up, the dinner-party and theatre afterwards.

'I'm glad we have had all this to look forward to,' said Vava on Friday morning as they both, in very pretty black embroidered frocks, were going up to the City.

'Yes,' agreed Stella, not too cordially, for though she was glad to go to the prize-giving and see the play, since Vava was in it, still neither of these things gave her unalloyed pleasure. At the prize-giving she would be surrounded by the parents of these girls, whom she did not expect to be very refined. As to the play, she, as a student and lover of Dante, objected to its being acted, though she did not say so to Vava. And as for the two other pleasures to which Vava was looking forward so eagerly, Stella did not care for them at all, and was only going to please Vava, whose great day it was.

'It has taken our mind off other worries,' announced Vava; and Stella, looking at her sister, noticed with a pang that the bright young face was paler and graver than it usually was, and realised that this week had been a trying one for her, though quite how trying she did not know, for Vava had not told her of her own private worry with Miss Briggs at school.

'We are going to have a very nice day, quite a long day of pleasure,' said Stella, smiling kindly at her sister.

'Yes,' agreed Vava, and she brightened up, for she had half-feared that Stella would either back out of the dinner on some excuse or another, or else go against her will and be stiff.

'I am afraid I shall be late for the prize-giving, for I cannot very well ask to be let off an afternoon the very first week I am with these people,' observed Stella.

'What a pity! But never mind, I will keep a seat for you,' replied Vava as she said good-bye.

However, the first thing her new employer said to her was, 'I shall not be here after lunch, Miss Wharton, so shall be glad if you will do this work for me before I go, and the rest of the day will be at your disposal, and next week I am taking a holiday, so I shall not require your services until Tuesday week.'

There had not been any arrangement made about Easter holidays, and Stella had quite made up her mind that she would only have the Bank Holidays, and was rather surprised. However, she did not imagine it was anything but a coincidence, or that her afternoon, like the Easter holidays, had been arranged by Mr. James Jones; which perhaps was just as well, or the perverse girl might not have enjoyed it as much.



Stella goes to the prize distribution

As it was, she went off at one o'clock, having got through her work, shaking hands cordially with old Mr. Murchison, whom she liked very much; and, having had lunch, arrived at the City school just in time. The porter in his gorgeous City livery was so impressed by Stella's beauty and dignified carriage that he took her for some important person, and showed her up to one of the front seats, which were reserved for patrons and patronesses, and she found herself sitting next a very pleasant woman, who took a great interest in education, and told Stella what a high opinion she had of this school and its staff; and a little farther up was Mrs. Montague Jones, talking in a friendly way to a lady whom Stella had met once and knew to be a society woman, but had not expected to meet here.

The proceedings were rather lengthy. There was the usual school concert, which it is difficult to say who dislike most, performers or audience; then came the play, and Stella was converted on the spot.

'What a delightful Beatrice!' cried her neighbour; 'she has a noble face.'

Stella smiled as she replied, 'I am glad you approve of her, for she is my sister.'

This broke the ice still more, and the two had become quite friendly by the time Vava came up for her two prizes, which Mr. Montague Jones presented to her with a specially friendly hand-shake.

Then there were speeches, congratulations, and refreshments, and after that Mr. Jones said, 'These are very delightful functions, no doubt; but they are a little long, and somehow they always make me very hot and tired and headachy. What do you ladies say to taking a run out into the country for a couple of hours, and getting home just in time for dinner? You can't dress to-night, thank goodness, and so you can't expect me to either.'

As all three were willing, he gave the order to the chauffeur, and they went off, Stella in front with Mr. Jones, and Vava behind with his wife.

'Miss Wharton,' said the old man, when they had got some way out, 'I don't want to bother you with business out of business hours; but I must tell you how sorry I

am you have left our firm.'

'Your firm, Mr. Jones?' exclaimed Stella in surprise.

'Yes! Surely James told you?' he replied.

'No, but it would have made no difference; I prefer to be where I am. I do not wish to be rude, Mr. Jones; but I think we had better not discuss the subject,' said Stella.

So Mr. Jones, finding he could do no good, changed the conversation, and talked so well on all sorts of topics that Stella, who had been excellently educated, and had been used to the society of a literary father, found her companion very entertaining.

Mrs. Montague Jones and Vava noted this with satisfaction. 'They are getting on very well,' said the former with a nod of her head.

'That's a blessing. Stella really is a very great trial to me,' announced Vava quite gravely.

Mrs. Montague Jones laughed heartily. 'I wonder what she would say if she heard you?' she replied.

'She would ask me quite solemnly what I meant, and I should not be able to tell her,' observed Vava.

'You ought to be proud to have such a beautiful sister; every one was asking me to-day who she was,' said Mrs. Jones.

'Beauty is a snare and a delusion for a City clerk, didn't they all say when you told them who she was?' asked Vava.

'I did not say what she did. I told them she was the daughter of a Scotch laird, and that you were her sister. They did not ask me her occupation; we are not so rude in the City,' answered Mrs. Jones.

Vava sighed. 'It was much nicer before,' she remarked.

Mrs. Jones looked sympathetically at Vava; she had no daughters, only the one son, and she would have liked nothing better than to adopt this girl if it had been possible; but as she knew it to be impossible she did not even speak of a plan she had in her head of taking them away for Easter, which silence cost her some self-

denial.

When they arrived at Belgrave Square, Vava, who as usual had made herself quite at home, went off with Mrs. Jones to get some flowers from the conservatory, and Stella was left in the drawing-room; but she had not been there two minutes when the door opened, and a tall, gentlemanly young man in evening-dress came in, saying to the footman who opened the door, 'Has Lord Rothery not come, then?'

Stella, shaken out of her reserve, started up as the junior partner of Baines, Jones & Co. came forward and shook hands gravely with her.

'Miss Wharton, you look surprised; surely you expected to see me here?' he asked.

'No, I did not; it was only this afternoon that I knew that Mr. Montague Jones had any connection with your firm. I did not know you were to be invited to meet me,' said Stella.

'Invited! I need no invitation to my father's house; but if you object to my presence I can easily dine at my club. I particularly told my mother to ask you if it made any difference, and I understood her to say it did not;' and then he wound up hotly, 'I do not know what I have done to make you think me such a cad as to intrude my presence upon you when I see it is so distasteful.'

Ten minutes later, when Mrs. Montague Jones and Vava came in laden with flowers, Stella was sitting on the sofa, and at their entrance Mr. James Jones, who was sitting beside her (as Vava noted with surprise), rose, and taking Stella's hand brought her to his mother, saying, 'Mother, this is my future wife.'

'It isn't! How dare you? Leave her hand alone!' cried Vava, starting forward, and then, as it dawned upon her that *it was*, she stood still and stared at them all; for Mrs. Jones, with a cry of delight, went forward to Stella, and Mr. Jones, who came in then, seemed to be just as delighted and not a bit surprised, though he said it was a pleasant surprise; and, oddest of all, Lord Rothery—who had cared for Stella himself once—now arrived on the scene, congratulated them both most heartily, and said, 'I was a true prophet. I guessed this would be the next news.'

This caused Vava to exclaim with indignation, 'How could you possibly, when *I* knew nothing about it, nor how they met—or anything? They'd quarrelled for ever a week ago!'

'Ah! that's a sure sign,' said Lord Rothery, teasing her. He had left the Jones family to make much of Stella, and took Vava to a window to console her, for he saw that she was more angry than pleased.

'I believe it's an awful mistake,' she confided to him.

'Not a bit of it; they are frightfully in love with each other. He's a splendid fellow, and quite a gentleman,' declared the young lord.

'Then they've been horridly deceitful about it, for Stella never would be decently civil to him while I was there, and left him last week; and now I suppose they have been meeting all this week and falling in love,' said Vava in tones of disgust.

'Not they, that was done before; it's what they call a Scotch wooing, and you ought to be glad about it, instead of being so disagreeable,' he protested.

A tear stole down Vava's face, but she would not give way, and only said, 'I don't see what is the use of her having taken a house when she meant to go and do this.'

'These are things one cannot foresee; one does not mean to do them; they do themselves. You'll do just the same when your time comes.'

'I shall not. If I were in love with you I should be civil to you, and let you see that I liked you,' declared Vava.

'All right; I'll remember that, and in the meantime I think you might be civil to your sister and Jamie.'

Vava made a little grimace. 'It's a hideous name, Jamie Jones!' she declared.

But that gentleman, thinking he had given his former friend time to get over her shock, came forward, and very soon managed to win her back to her old friendliness, as he gave her his arm to take her in to dinner. Poor Vava! she had so looked forward to this dinner; it had turned out so very different to what she had expected, and no one said anything about the play; so she made up her mind that they were going to 'fuss' over Stella all the evening and give up the play.

But Lord Rothery came to the rescue. 'I propose an amendment to the evening's programme. I suppose Jamie is going to cry off his engagement with me, so I vote you take me to the theatre in Stella's place, and leave her to rest here.'

This seemed a very good plan, and evidently suited the two most concerned; and to Vava's relief they started in good time for *Henry VIII.*, and in spite of a little sore feeling at heart, she managed to enjoy it very much.

The Joneses drove Vava home after the theatre, and there she found 'nursie' and Stella sitting by the kitchen fire; and even Vava, much though she had admired her sister, thought she had never seen her look so beautiful as she did to-night.

'All's well that ends well, my bairns, and he's a braw young laddie,' said old nursie, lapsing into Scotch.

'Has he been to see you?' asked Vava.

'Yes, and wanted to know if I would trust him with my bairn. Eh, that I would!' she said.

'And what am I to do?' cried Vava, and burst into tears.

Stella had her arms round her sister in a moment. 'It won't make any difference, and we are going to stay where we are till the end of the year, and then you and nursie shall come and live with us,' she explained.

'We shall see,' put in nursie, who had her own ideas upon the subject, and proved to be right.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THINGS STRAIGHTEN OUT.

It is three months later, a lovely evening in June, and the back garden of No. 2 Heather Road was a blaze of fine flowers, and under the apple-tree in the centre of the lawn sat four girls in dresses which looked a little too elaborate and costly for a quiet tea in a little suburban villa.

So apparently thought the thrifty old housekeeper, who came out in a plain alpaca gown, and said, 'Ah, my bairns, but you'll soil your beautiful frocks sitting on those garden-seats!'

'We can't possibly wear our ordinary frocks to-day, nursie; it would be a dreadful come down. Why! you have taken off your "silken gown," and it's Stella's wedding-day!' cried Vava merrily.

Evidently she had forgiven her sister the surprise she had given her on that eventful breaking-up day, for she looked the picture of happiness.

'And do you think I'm going to cook in a silk gown, whatever the day? No, indeed! it's safely packed away, as yours ought to be, young leddies!'

'We are going back to the workaday world to-morrow, nursie; let us stop in fairyland for to-day,' said Eva.

Mrs. Morrison smiled at her; they all called her nursie now, even Doreen had been allowed this privilege, and that was not the only privilege she had been allowed, for, to her amazement, she had been invited to be a bridesmaid to her goddess of beauty at the quiet wedding at a West-End church. Perhaps Vava was as surprised as Doreen; Amy and Eva she understood, but Doreen she had not expected to be asked, although the Stella of the last three months had been a Stella she had not known before.

Stella had explained it very simply. 'I should like to have those who have been good to me in my days of adversity,' she said, 'and among these were the Hackneys.'

And the four fashionably dressed girls were Stella's four bridesmaids, for Mr.

James had begged for an early wedding; and when Stella demurred because of the new responsibilities she had taken upon her with the new house, Mrs. Morrison had come to the rescue, and offered to keep house for Amy and Eva.

'But, nursie,' Stella had said, 'we want you at Lomore; your rooms are there waiting for you, and why should you stay down here away from your home when there is no need?'

'There is need, Miss Stella; they need me, and I could not leave them just now. Your first duty is to your husband; mine is dead, and I am of use here; but I'll come up home for a holiday in the summer when my young leddies take theirs.'

Then Vava stoutly announced that if nursie stayed at No. 2 Heather Road so should she; and if she had not quite meant it, for Lomore was home to her too, the gleam of joy in Mrs. Morrison's eye at the suggestion decided her.

At this Stella protested still more strongly; but it was really a way out of a difficulty, for Vava was very happy at school and with Mrs. Morrison, and she would spend the long summer holidays at Lomore, and in the autumn Stella would be at her town house, and Vava could be constantly with her.

And so the tangled skein straightened itself out, and the little household at No. 2 Heather Road went on very happily.

Eva was acting up to her suggested motto of 'Save' to such good purpose that, thanks to overtime and rigid self-denial, encouraged by Mrs. Morrison, she had paid off half her debt.

'Fancy, fifteen pounds in three months! At that rate I shall soon be able to look the whole world in the face!' she cried as she handed the last instalment of the fifteen pounds to the kindly creditor.

Mrs. Morrison was as pleased as the girl; not that she was anxious to have the money back, but that she wanted Eva to be out of debt.

Stella, whom her short spell of poverty had made thoughtful on such matters, gave the bridesmaids their dresses, which meant best summer-frocks and hats for them all, and saved Eva that expense; and of pleasures they had no lack, for Mr. Montague Jones's car was always running down to Blackstead.

Mrs. Montague Jones could not adopt Vava, but she insisted on considering her a relation, and Vava never felt lonely, even while Stella was away on her

honeymoon. And when she returned, on her way up north, she fetched Vava and Mrs. Morrison, and took them to Lomore with her that they might be with her when she went to the home of her fathers, and see the welcome she received.

And it was a warm welcome, a welcome to the late Laird's daughter and to the new young Laird, who had won for himself golden opinions during the short time he had reigned there, for his father had made over the property to his son when, unknown to Stella, and before he had been engaged to her, he had sought out her special protégées and assured them of his friendship.

'All that time ago!' commented Vava; but she thought it best to refrain from alluding to the time when Stella behaved so badly to her present husband that she (Vava) had pitied him. 'Grown-up people are odd. I prefer schoolgirls myself; you can understand them,' she said with emphasis.

THE END.



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