

# MARION ST. WEBB

THE GIRLS OF  
CHEQUERTREES

Marion St. John Webb  
**The Girls of Chequertrees**

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### CHAPTER I

#### THE WINDOW OPPOSITE

On a cold, damp January evening a woman sat in the dusk of a fire-lit room gazing through the window. For half an hour she had been sitting there fidgeting impatiently with her hands and feet every few minutes, but never moving from the position she had taken up by the window. Her expectant gaze was centred on the outline of a house that stood on the opposite side of the village green at Barrowfield.

From the window, or for the matter of that from the green or the road that encircled the green, little could be seen of the house, as the high ivy-topped walls which surrounded the garden guarded it jealously from prying eyes. It was only through the tall iron-rail gate set into an arch in the stone wall that you could ascertain that the house was flat-fronted and square, a house entirely covered with ivy, out from whose dark, rustling leaves many windows peered like deep-set eyes. A broad gravel path swept from the gate to a flight of white steps that led up to the front door. The garden, stretching away on either side of the path, appeared to be thick and bushy with shrubs and tall old trees.

This much the woman at the window had observed from the gate, and now she was sitting—waiting.

A little breeze sprang up and scurried through the ivy leaves as if it and they were whispering together about something. Although the house seemed silent, it was not deserted, for presently, as it grew darker, a light appeared in one of the lower windows and a blind was drawn—a red blind through which the light glowed, seeming to increase in strength as the house gradually faded into the dusk and was lost to sight.

The woman who was watching sighed and nervously bit the nail of her thumb.

"That's where she is," she muttered to herself, gazing at the red blind.

At that moment the sound of wheels and jingling bells became audible, and a light flickered at the top of the main road that led down to the village from the station. The woman frowned and strained her eyes toward the dancing light on the road. It was the station cab approaching, jogging along at its usual pace, slowly but surely, with stout old Tom Bagg, the driver, snugly ensconced on the box-seat.

Outside the gate of the ivy-covered house the cab came to a stand-still, and a young girl alighted. She was plainly visible as she paused beneath the street lamp outside the gate before entering the dark garden, followed by Tom Bagg much beladen and struggling with boxes. In a few minutes the old cabman came out again, and the cab jogged away back to the station.

The woman who had watched all this intently then moved away from the window, and, limping slightly as she walked, made her way to the fire. Crouching down on the hearth she poked the fire into a blaze and warmed her cold hands—her eyes fixed broodingly on the leaping flames. After a while she pulled a chair toward her and sank into it—still with her eyes on the fire, lost in thought.

She was aroused from her reverie by the sound of wheels and jingling bells again, heralding the return of the cab. Instantly she got up, limped back to the window, and peered out.

Once more the cab stopped at the gate of the ivy-covered house, and this time two girls got out and passed through the garden gate, followed by Tom Bagg still more beladen and struggling beneath boxes and parcels and travelling rugs.

The woman watched until old Tom Bagg had departed again, then she gave an odd, short laugh, and for a while stared gloomily out at the closed iron-rail gate in the wall opposite. Presently she said to herself, "Well—now we shall see!" Then she pulled down her blind.

## CHAPTER II

### PAMELA RECEIVES A STRANGE INVITATION

A few days before the incident occurred which is recorded in the previous chapter, Pamela Heath was standing at the dining-room window of her home in Oldminster (a town about forty miles from Barrowfield). Pamela, like the woman who sat watching the ivy-covered house, was also gazing through a window—but on to a very different scene: morning, a bright January morning, and a busy stream of people passing up and down the sunny street.

Pamela was a tall, slim girl, about sixteen years old; she was very pleasant to look at with her curly, chestnut-coloured hair, tied at her neck with a brown ribbon bow, and her brown eyes and clear complexion, which were emphasized by the dark green dress she was wearing. Strictly speaking Pamela would not have been called pretty—in the sense that regular features stand for prettiness; her nose was a tiny bit square at the tip, and the distance from her nose to her upper lip was a trifle more than beauty experts would allow, and her mouth was a little too wide for prettiness. But those who met Pamela for the first time found her expression of frank good-humour far more attractive than mere prettiness. And when she was in one of her 'beamy' moods (as her brother Michael used to call them)—that is, when she was vivaciously talking, and laughing, and keenly interested in making other people enjoy themselves—then she was irresistible. However grudgingly you admitted it, you found you *had* to confess to yourself that you were enjoying yourself—when Pamela was 'beamy.'

This sunny Saturday morning when we first see Pamela she stands drumming on the window-pane with her fingers, watching for Michael to come round the corner of the street from the post-office, where he has been to post their father's Saturday morning letters. Michael is her elder brother—a year older than Pamela—and the two are great chums. There are two sisters and another brother younger than Pamela, but they will be introduced by and by, as Pamela is not thinking of them at the moment; she is thinking of Michael, and wishing he would hurry up so that they might start off on their sketching expedition.

They were both fond of sketching, and used to tramp out on Saturday mornings with their sketch-blocks and pencils (and some sandwiches and fruit in a satchel) and try to picture some of the beautiful scenery outside Oldminster.

But there was to be no sketching for either of them this morning. For on his way to the house where Pamela lived was a little old man, with a very high bald forehead, and a top hat, and a shiny black coat—and the news he was bringing was to drive all thoughts of sketching from their minds for some time to come.

Long afterward Pamela remembered every detail of this Saturday morning, all the little familiar sounds going on in the house—the clatter of dishes downstairs; the murmur of Mother's and Doris's voices in the hall, and John's high, childish tones asking them some question—and then their laughing at him. Father's typewriter could be heard faintly clicking away in the study, and in the drawing-room Olive was playing the only tune she knew on the piano. The butcher's cart came clattering down the street and pulled up next door.

Pamela stopped drumming on the window and, pushing it open, leant out to see if Michael was coming. Then it was she caught sight of a rather round-shouldered old man in a top hat hurrying down the street, stopping every other second to peer closely at the numbers on the gates. When he reached Pamela's gate he not only stopped and looked at the number but, straightening himself up, he pushed the gate open and came in.

Pamela withdrew her head hastily and stepped back into the room.

"Whoever can this be?" she thought. "He looks rather shabby, poor soul—I wonder if he's come begging or trying to sell machine needles."

But the little old man's business had nothing to do with either of these things, as Pamela was soon to find out. A few minutes later she found herself in her father's study being introduced to Mr Joseph Sigglesworth, whose mild blue eyes and nervous manner ill accorded with the businesslike news which he was endeavouring to convey. Mr and Mrs Heath and Pamela sat facing the nervous little man, who had removed his top hat of course, and now exposed the high bald forehead which gave him, so he fancied, a slight resemblance to Shakespeare. Slight though it was, this resemblance gave Mr Joseph Sigglesworth a considerable amount of happiness; it always made him feel more important directly he took his hat off.

"Perhaps I ought to say, first of all," began Mr Sigglesworth, producing a pair of spectacles from his coat pocket and commencing to polish them nervously with his handkerchief, "that I—that I am—you will excuse me, sir, *and* madam," he turned to Mr and Mrs Heath and inclined his head, "that—I was going to say, I have the honour to be a kind of distant relation of a distant relation of yours." He rubbed the glasses a little quicker. "You remember Miss Emily Crabingway, doubtless. The lady is, if I am not mistaken, a fourth cousin to—to madam here?" He inclined his head again toward Mrs Heath.

"Emily Crabingway! Why, yes," said Mrs Heath. "But I haven't seen her for years—quite twelve years I should think."

"So she says, madam, so she says," continued Mr Sigglesworth. "Well—I am her second cousin once removed, if I may say so—and she has entrusted me with a little—er—a little transaction—I mean proposal, or rather suggestion—er—with regard to your daughter Pamela." Mr Sigglesworth was still polishing his glasses energetically. "Miss Emily Crabingway is obliged to go up to Scotland—on business. That was all I had to tell you about that part, I believe—yes, that's correct—on *business*, she said. She will be away for six months..." He hesitated, his eyes on the top of the window curtains behind Mr Heath's head. "Yes—six months—and during that time she wants to know if Miss Pamela will go and live at her house in Barrowfield, and look after it for her—and—" he went on, emphasizing each word as if repeating a lesson, "certain conditions being undertaken by Miss Pamela, and fulfilled properly—Miss Crabingway will—er—bestow upon the young lady a sum of—if I may say so—a not inconsiderable sum—er—in short, fifty pounds." Mr Sigglesworth removed his gaze from the top of the curtains to Mr Heath's boots, which he appeared to study intently for a space.

Mr and Mrs Heath exchanged surprised glances, but Pamela was looking wonderingly at Mr Sigglesworth's magnificent forehead, and did not move. Before any of them could speak Mr Sigglesworth resumed:

"If Miss Pamela agrees to accept the offer she would be required to sign this paper, promising to obey certain instructions of Miss Crabingway's; but doubtless you would like to read it—I have it here in my pocket."

Mr Sigglesworth stopped polishing his glasses, and resting them on the top of his hat, which lay on a chair beside him, he felt in his coat pocket. But his memory had played him false; it was the wrong pocket. He turned the contents out, but not finding what he sought he tried another pocket, fumbling with nervous, clumsy fingers, and producing various papers and envelopes and odd bits of string. The longer he searched the more nervous he got. "Tut! tut!" he kept saying to himself. "But how careless of me! Tut! tut! Exceedingly annoying!"

Mrs Heath tried to ease the situation by murmuring something polite, but Pamela was suddenly seized with an intense desire to start laughing. Mr Sigglesworth looked so funny and perplexed, and he kept dropping his papers on the floor in his nervousness, and once he knocked his hat down, and the glasses too. Pamela, almost choking with the effort of keeping her face straight, was glad of the opportunity of rescuing the hat and placing it back on the chair; she was thankful to be able to do anything at all instead of sitting still and trying to keep serious. Mr Sigglesworth's apologies and thanks for his hat were profuse.

At length, after going through five pockets, Mr Siggleshorne found what he wanted, to everybody's relief.

"Perhaps I should mention," he said, as he handed an envelope across to Pamela, "that Miss Crabingway is inviting three other young girls—somewhere about Miss Pamela's age—to stay at her house also—but you will see about that, though, in the letter."

Pamela opened the envelope and spread out the sheet of paper it contained so that her mother and father could read it at the same time. It was a sheet of foolscap paper covered with black, spiky handwriting, writing which Mrs Heath recognized as Miss Emily Crabingway's from the Christmas card she received from her every year, the interchange of Christmas cards being the only communication she had held with this distant cousin of hers for the last twelve years.

"Read it aloud, Pamela," said her father. So Pamela read the following letter:

*CHEQUERTREES,*

*BARROWFIELD,*

*January 3rd*

DEAR PAMELA,

Although I have not seen you since you were four years old, I have a fancy that I should like you to come to Barrowfield and look after my house and its inmates while I am away on business....

Here Mr Siggleshorne smiled and nodded his head vigorously, and leaning back in his chair began to polish his glasses again.

... I shall be away for six months, and during that time—if you agree to come—you must promise to obey the following instructions. You will please sign your name under them and give the paper to Mr Siggleshorne, who is acting for me in this matter, as I am unable to come and visit you myself owing to my urgent call from home.

These are the instructions to be obeyed:

1. While you are staying under my roof you are not to visit, nor invite to the house, any relatives whatsoever.

2. No letters are to be written home, but one postcard every month may be sent; and you may only receive post-cards, no letters, from your relatives—and then only one card each month.

3. On no account may you try to open the locked-up room at the end of the first floor landing. Nor may you peer through the keyhole.

A faint chuckle escaped Mr Siggleshorne, a fleeting, scarcely audible chuckle which he suffocated immediately. There was a blank space after the 'instructions' for Pamela to sign her name; and then a few more lines ended the letter.

I am leaving my two trusted servants, Martha and Ellen, to cook, and clean the house. When I return at the end of six months I will hand over to you—providing you have not broken any of the above conditions—the sum of £50, which is deposited meanwhile with my banker. (Enclosed you will find banker's guarantee for same.)

I am likewise offering the same sum of money to three other girls who are being asked to come and stay at my house, and to whom I want you to act as hostess. The girls' names are: Beryl Cranswick, Isobel Prior, and Caroline Weston.

Send me a wire to reach me by Saturday evening saying whether you accept this invitation or not. If you accept you must arrive at Barrowfield not later than Tuesday next.

Trusting you will be sensible and wire 'yes,'

*Yours sincerely,*

*EMILY CRABINGWAY*

There was silence for a few moments when Pamela finished reading. She handed the banker's guarantee across to her father, who took it without a word.

"Well!" queried Mr Sigglesworth, polishing nervously.

"Well," said Mrs Heath, "I think we must have a little time to consider the matter."

"Why does Miss Crabingway want to cut me off from you all like that, Mother, for six whole months?" burst out Pamela.

Mrs Heath shook her head and looked across at Mr Sigglesworth, who, catching her inquiring glance, shook his head also.

"I know no more than I have told you, madam," he said. "Miss Crabingway sent for me—she has been very good to me occasionally, when I have been temporarily embarrassed for money—if you will excuse my introducing such a subject—and asked me to go and see the parents of the young ladies she wished to invite, and present them personally with her letter and instructions. I have already seen one of the young ladies—"

"And is she willing to come—the one you've seen?" asked Pamela.

"She is going to make up her mind and wire to-day to Miss Crabingway, and if she wires 'yes' she will post on to me the paper of instructions, duly signed, to my address by Monday morning." Mr Sigglesworth stood up and began gathering his belongings together preparatory to taking his leave. "I will leave you my address; will you kindly send me your paper, if you decide to accept? Unfortunately, you have very little time to consider the matter—only a few hours—as Miss Crabingway is expecting your wire this evening.... Now is there anything more you would like to ask me, madam, or sir?" he asked politely.

But although Mrs Heath put one or two anxious questions, he could throw no further light on the matter than before.

"I think—if you will forgive my saying so—that it is just a whim—a fancy on Miss Crabingway's part. I feel sure your daughter will be well cared for at Barrowfield—and if she does not like it (although I suppose I shouldn't say this) she can always come home—and forfeit the fifty pounds, can't she?"

"Yes, that's true," said Mrs Heath.

"H'm, h'm ... yes—anyway, we can talk the matter over together and wire by this afternoon," said Mr Heath.

"This is my address," said Mr Sigglesworth, handing Pamela a thumb-ed and dog-eared visiting-card on which was printed: "Joseph Sigglesworth, Fig Tree Court, Inner Temple, London." "And now, if you will kindly excuse me, I must hurry away, as I have other visits to pay this morning."

Mrs Heath invited him to stay and have some refreshment before he went, but he declined, saying that he must lose no time in informing the other young ladies of Miss Crabingway's invitation. So shaking hands all round he departed, leaving them not a little perplexed.

No sooner was he gone than Doris and Michael burst into the study, anxious to know what the queer little old man's business with Pamela could be. They were soon told all about it, and read Miss Crabingway's letter with much curiosity.

Doris, who was a year younger than Pamela, was as unlike her sister in looks as she was in temperament. Doris was pale, very pale, with very fair hair and eyelashes, and light blue eyes. She was inclined to be pessimistic and over-anxious about most things, and lived up to this reputation on the present occasion.

Michael, with handsome features, an infectious laugh, and chestnut-coloured hair (like Pamela's), was nothing if not optimistic; he and Pamela were always getting sighed over by Doris because of the levity shown by them over things which Doris considered "too important to be laughed at." But to-day Michael's optimism seemed to have suddenly deserted him, and he put down Miss Crabingway's letter in silence.

Pamela was watching his face anxiously. "What do you think about it, Michael?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suppose it's all right. What do you think about it yourself, Pam?" he said. ("Six whole months! And only a few miserable post-cards! Whatever was old Miss Crabingway thinking of!" said Michael to himself.)

"After all, it's a very simple matter," said Mr Heath. "Pamela to look after Miss Crabingway's house for six months. There's nothing in that. Six months' rest from her studies won't harm her, and she can keep up her sketching and take some books with her.... It'll be quite a holiday."

"It's only those restrictions about not being allowed to see any of us—and—and that curious mention of a locked door..." said Mother.

"Ah, yes! I don't like the sound of that at all," said Doris, shaking her head.

"Oh, come now—it may be only her private and personal belongings she's put in that room," said Mr Heath.

"It *might* be, of course," said Doris, in a tone that implied that nothing was more unlikely.

"Of course that must be it," continued Mr Heath (from whom Michael and Pamela inherited their optimism). "Miss Crabingway wouldn't want all those strange girls upsetting her personal things.... And remember the fifty pounds—it'll be most useful for Pamela. But still, you must decide yourself, Pamela, what you would rather do."

"I *don't* want to go—and I *do*—if you know what I mean," said Pamela.

They understood what she meant. But the matter had to be decided immediately, and so they all sat down and began to discuss it from each and every point of view, until at length, after much hesitation, Pamela made up her mind to accept Miss Crabingway's invitation.

Later in the day she and Michael walked round to the post-office and sent off the wire to Barrowfield; and Pamela also sent the signed paper off to Mr Sigglesthorne.

During the next few days Pamela lived in a state of excited rush and hurry. There seemed so much to be done, so many friends to see and say good-bye to; so many clothes to get ready and pack; so much shopping to do; and then there were a hundred and one odd jobs that she meant to attend to before she went away, and never got time to see to any of them after all. Everybody seemed very kind and anxious to help her as much as they could. Even John and twelve-year-old Olive begged to be allowed to help, and proposed that they should take a hand at packing Pamela's trunk. Olive, indeed, could not be persuaded that her help was not needed until she had been pacified with the gift of Pamela's glove-box and a scent satchet to keep for herself. That was always the easiest way to divert Olive's ambitions—make her a present of something you didn't want and she quickly forgot what she had been clamouring for a few minutes earlier. John, who was two years younger than Olive, was the 'baby' of the family in name only. John was sturdy, noisy, and emphatic in all he said and did—and was not so easily put off with gifts. He would accept the gift and then go on asking for the other thing as well. Fortunately he was not so insistent on helping to pack as on being allowed to sit on the lid of the trunk to squash it down when it was full and about to be locked. This little matter was easily arranged, and when everything was quite ready he was called in, asked to be so obliging as to cast his weight on to the top of the trunk—which he did with great alacrity—and the trunk was locked in triumph.

On the Monday night Mother came into Pamela's bedroom and wished her an extra good-night.

"Be sure to come home if you are unhappy, dear. Or if you are ill or anything—let me know—and bother the old fifty pounds," said Mother. "Promise me, Pamela—or I shall be so unhappy."

So Pamela promised. "But I'm sure to be all right, Mother, and you're not to worry about me at all, dear. But do take care of yourselves, all of you, till I come back."

Pamela said good night quite cheerfully, but after her mother had gone downstairs again she found that she did not feel cheerful a bit. She began to think things like "This is the last time I shall sleep in my own little room," and "This is the last time I shall hear Michael whistling on his way upstairs," until she made herself cry. Then she scolded herself for being so silly, and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER III

### BERYL

When Pamela alighted at Barrowfield station on the Tuesday afternoon daylight was beginning to fade and a fine drizzling rain had set in. She gazed round the deserted platform, and gave a shiver as a chilly little breeze rustled past her, stirring the loose bits of paper on the stone paving and making the half-closed door of the General Waiting Room creak dismally as it pushed it farther open. Pamela had been sitting for an hour and a half in the train, and she felt cold and stiff and suddenly depressed. She was the only passenger to get out at Barrowfield, and the only living soul about the place as far as she could see was a porter, who now came strolling down the platform and took charge of her luggage.

"Where to, miss?" inquired the porter; and his voice at once reminded Pamela of the voice of a man who used to come round selling muffins in Oldminster, and this made her conjure up an instant's vision of home and Mother and Michael and all of them sitting round the fire while Doris toasted muffins for tea. It was a ridiculous thing to think of at this moment, but she could not help it. How she wished she were at home, toasting muffins.... But the man was waiting.

"Miss Crabingway's house, Chequertrees," she answered. "Is it far from here?"

"'Bout a mile an' 'arf, Chequertrees is," said the porter.

"Oh, dear," said Pamela. "Well, can I get a cab or anything?"

Before the porter could reply the sound of heavy footsteps was heard on the wooden floor of the station entrance, and the next moment Tom Bagg hove into sight. Of course Pamela did not know what his name was then, though she knew it well enough afterward; you could not help knowing it if you stayed in Barrowfield more than a couple of hours, because Mr Bagg was a local celebrity. However, all Pamela knew at present was that a fat, burly man with an enormous waterproof cape and a waterproof hat stood before her. Here was the very person she wanted—the Barrowfield cabman. He touched his hat with a fat forefinger.

"Evenin', miss. Ascuse me, but are you the young lady for Chequertrees?" he asked.

When Pamela had informed him that she was, he told her that he had had instructions from Miss Crabingway to convey her and her luggage from the station.

So Pamela got into the welcome cab outside, and was driven away through the dusk. She could not see much through the blurred and steaming windows, and the little she could make out appeared to be all hedges and trees. Presently she could feel that the cab was going downhill, then the pace slackened and it seemed to climb a little, then for a long time (or so it seemed to Pamela) the cab jogged along on level ground. The slow pace at which the cab moved along, the impossibility of seeing anything through the windows, and her impatience to reach her journey's end, made it seem a very long mile and a half from the station.

All at once the cab stopped with a violent jerk. And here was Chequertrees, at last. Tom Bagg clambered down from his seat and held the cab door open while Pamela got quickly out. He smiled genially down at her, and then pulled the iron bell-chain outside the gate of the house.

While Tom Bagg got her boxes down from the cab Pamela gazed at the house which was to be her home for the next six months. She could not see very much of the house from the gate—a tall iron-barred gate set into a high wall topped with ivy. There was a long and wide gravel path up to the front door, and Pamela could see that the house was covered with ivy and had many windows. The garden struck her as being a lovely place for hide-and-seek, on account of its thick bushes and number of big trees. As she passed through the gate and made her way along the path, the cabman following with her luggage, she saw that there was a light in one of the windows behind a red blind.

She had no time to notice anything else before the front door was opened by a middle-aged servant in white cap and apron.

"Oh, I'm Miss Heath—Pamela Heath," said Pamela, as the maid waited silently.

"Oh, please come in, miss," said the maid. "Miss Crabingway told us to expect you."

Pamela stepped in, then turned to the cabman, remembering his fare; but she was told that he had already been paid by Miss Crabingway, and was going back to meet the next down train and fetch another young lady to the house—"What I was told you was expecting here," he said to the maid.

"That's right," she replied. "Two more young ladies we are expecting to-night."

"Oh, aye. Two it might be—one for certain. *I* remember. Good evenin', miss." And depositing Pamela's boxes in the hall the cabman took his departure.

Pamela then became aware that another white-aproned servant was standing at the back of the hall, waiting to receive her; she was quite an elderly woman with white hair. Directly Pamela caught sight of her kind, motherly old face, the feeling of depression that had been with her ever since she had got out at Barrowfield station fell away from her, and she felt at home. This was Martha, she learnt, and Ellen it was who had opened the front door. In the few minutes' talk Pamela had with them before being shown upstairs to her bedroom to take off her outdoor things and have a wash, she gathered that Miss Crabingway had departed yesterday morning, and had left word that all orders were to be taken from Miss Pamela, "just as if it was Miss Crabingway herself that was telling us what to do," volunteered Ellen. It made Pamela feel awfully young and inefficient and responsible to hear these two elderly, experienced housekeepers asking *her* for orders.

"Oh, you'll please go on just as usual, won't you? ... It's all so strange and new to me—I do hope you'll help me to do things right. I'll have to come and talk things over with you presently," she said.

And though Ellen declared in tones of great solemnity that anything that she could do to be of use to Miss Pamela would be done with pleasure, yet it was the kindly smile in Martha's eyes that comforted Pamela. Things would be all right, she felt, so long as Martha was there.

Pamela felt a great liking for Martha from the first—she seemed such a sensible, cheerful soul; and the more Pamela got to know about her afterward the more she respected and trusted her. Ellen she was not so sure about, though she grew to like her later on, in spite of her melancholy expression and tone of voice. Pamela was not long in discovering that Ellen had grown to enjoy her melancholy as other people enjoy their happiness. It was an art in which Ellen certainly excelled. She could relate at great length, when in the mood, all the various strokes of bad fortune that had fallen on her numerous relatives and acquaintances, and all the illnesses they had suffered from, and died of, and her favourite recreation was wandering round old churchyards and exclaiming over the early age at which numbers of people died.

But though Martha and Ellen might be opposite temperamentally, yet they certainly united in making Pamela very welcome on her arrival at Chequertrees, and she found them most kind and willing and anxious to make her comfortable. Ellen carried her boxes up to the bedroom, while Martha bustled about, getting hot water for her to wash, and pulling down blinds and lighting the gas.

As soon as Pamela was left alone in her bedroom she threw off her hat and sat down on a chair and looked about her, taking stock of her new surroundings. Of course she had not had time to notice much so far, but as she had passed through the square hall and up the soft-carpeted stairs to her bedroom, which was on the first floor landing, she had got an impression of a house well furnished, but sombre. There were a great many thick plush curtains hanging over doors and at windows, and the walls were crowded with pictures, most of them having heavy dark frames. And now, this room, which Miss Crabingway had said was to be Pamela's bedroom—well, it was handsomely furnished and clean, but to Pamela's eyes, used to her airy, sparsely furnished little room at home with its fresh white paint, oak furniture, and plain green linoleum, this room seemed dark and overcrowded. The bedroom suite was dark mahogany, and had as one of its pieces a huge wardrobe with two glass doors which filled almost the entire length of one wall; it was evidently intended, originally, for a much larger room than the one it was in at present; here it towered over the other furniture like a bullying giant. The bedstead, dressing-table, and washstand, although they were of dark mahogany,

were evidently not of the same set as the wardrobe. Pamela observed that the wallpaper was an all-over floral design in various shades of green and raised gold roses; the gloomy, old-fashioned fireplace, with its marble mantelpiece, on which were arranged a score of old china ornaments and photo frames, and a massive marble clock, was the chief feature of the wall opposite the wardrobe. The window-curtains, the duchess set on the dressing-table, and the coverlet on the bed were the only touches of white to relieve the general sombreness that prevailed. Pamela was sorry to see that there was a thick soft carpet on the floor—she hated carpets in bedrooms. As she wandered round the room she was to occupy for many a day to come, becoming acquainted with it from various angles, she sighed; everything looked solid, expensive, and subdued, but it did not please her eye at all (though she had to admit to herself that everything seemed very comfortable nevertheless).

The clothes you choose, and the furniture you choose to surround yourself with, are an index of your character to a stranger. To Pamela, who could not remember ever seeing Miss Crabingway, this room was an introduction. Of Miss Crabingway's character she knew nothing, but in her mind's eye she pictured Miss Crabingway fond of solid, expensive things, as large and dark, with rich, black, rustling dresses, and gold brooches, and a lot of thick gold rings set with large stones on her fingers. Her face she could not imagine—except that it would be massive and well preserved. Pamela never could imagine people's faces, in her mind's eye; she could conjure up people's figures and movements clearly—but the faces were always dim and misty. It sometimes worried her that even her mother's face or Michael's refused to be clearly recalled when she was away from them. Of course she knew their features by heart, and every twist and turn of their heads—but she could not see their features in her mind's eye.

Having imagined Miss Crabingway, therefore, as well as she was able, she hastily flung off her outdoor things, washed her hands and face and brushed her hair, and prepared to go downstairs. She was wearing her artistic, dark green frock, and as she stood a moment with her hand on the door knob taking a final glance round the room, she looked as fresh and clear-eyed a specimen of girlhood as one could wish to see.

She made her way downstairs, and seeing an open door and a lighted room on the left of the hall, she entered. It was, as she had expected, the dining-room. Dark, sombre furniture again, and rich hangings; there was a cheerful fire burning in the grate, and a white cloth, and cups and saucers on the table hinted at tea in the near future.

Pamela had come in silently, her footsteps making no sound on the thick carpet, and it was not until she had been standing for a few seconds inside the doorway that she noticed that there was some one already in the room—some one who had evidently not seen, nor heard, Pamela enter.

Crouching by the fire, and almost hidden by a big arm-chair that stood on the rug, was a girl; she had her back to the door and did not move as Pamela stood watching for a moment. The girl's thin hands were stretched out to the blaze as if she were cold, and her head leant against the side of the chair; she made no sound, but there was something in her attitude that suggested great dejection and loneliness.

Pamela was just about to go forward when a slight sound between a sob and a sigh escaped the figure, and Pamela paused. She felt that it would make the girl embarrassed to think that she had been watched and overheard. So Pamela backed stealthily out of the room (hoping she wouldn't run into Ellen or Martha), and crept up the stairs again; she waited a moment on the landing, shut her bedroom door with a snap, then came running downstairs, humming and patting the banisters with her hand as she came—so as to give warning of her approach.

She entered the dining-room. The girl was sitting in the arm-chair now, and stood up nervously as Pamela came in. She was a pale, thin girl, with large dark eyes and black hair, and her movements were nervous and jerky. She wore a dark-coloured skirt and a white silk blouse with short sleeves to the elbow, which made her look very cold, and emphasized the thinness of her arms.

The two girls gazed at each other for a second, then Pamela gave a friendly smile.

"As there's no one here to introduce us, we'll introduce ourselves, shall we? I'm Pamela Heath," she said.

"I'm Beryl Cranswick," said the girl, smiling shyly.

Pamela held out her hand, and they shook hands.

"I'm so glad to meet you," said Pamela. "I suppose we are the first two to arrive."

"I suppose so," said Beryl, which did not help matters forward at all.

"What time did you arrive?" asked Pamela. "I came by the four o'clock train from Marylebone."

"I arrived here this afternoon about three," Beryl informed her.

"Oh, you've been here a long time then—it's just gone six now. I didn't know you were here when I came—they didn't mention it to me.... But have you had any tea yet?"

Beryl shook her head.

"Why—why ever not?" said Pamela, in surprise, ringing the bell by the fireplace. "We'll have some at once, shall we?"

"They did ask me if I'd have some—but I said I'd wait. I—I didn't like to—to bother them—till you came," stammered Beryl.

"Why, you must have been awfully cold and hungry after that long railway journey; you *should* have had a cup of tea and something—I'm sure it wouldn't have been a bit of trouble to them," said Pamela, seizing the poker and stirring up the fire. "Sit down and have a good warm—you look quite cold still. We'll soon have this fire ... there! that's better."

Ellen appeared at this moment, in answer to the bell.

"Oh, could we have some tea, please?" said Pamela. "What time are the other arrivals expected, can you tell me?"

"I don't know, miss," replied Ellen. "At least, not for certain—sometime to-day, that's all Miss Crabingway told us. The last down train gets in at Barrowfield at midnight."

"Oh, I see. Well, it's no good waiting for them, I suppose—we'd better have tea now in case they don't arrive till midnight," said Pamela.

"Very well, miss. I'll bring it in at once," and Ellen departed.

It was rather a queer experience for Pamela, playing hostess in this strange house to strange people, but her frank, easy manners helped her considerably.

Beryl, in Pamela's position, would have suffered agonies of indecision and nervousness, and she felt thankful she was not in Pamela's shoes, though she certainly envied the unself-conscious ease with which Pamela managed things. They were really quite small, insignificant things, but to Beryl, very self-conscious and timid, they would have caused much dismay. Beryl was passing through a stage of acute self-consciousness, not due to vanity in the slightest, but to nerves. Even to eat in public was a misery to her; although she was aware that she was scrupulously particular in the way she drank or ate her food, yet she hated having to have meals with other people; she always felt that they were watching her—criticizing her.

And so, when she and Pamela had tea together for the first time, she hardly ate or drank anything. Unfortunately, by accident, she got a plum jam stone in her mouth and did not like to remove it, suffering much discomfort in consequence until Pamela's attention being distracted to the window blind behind her for a moment, Beryl quickly conveyed the stone to her plate again, and finished her tea in peace. Pamela, who was as fastidious as anyone in her table manners, was yet quite easy, and appeared to enjoy a huge tea with comfort and daintiness combined. Beryl certainly did envy her that evening. She wondered what Pamela would have done if she had got a plum stone in her mouth—and rather wished this could happen so that she might see how easily Pamela would act. But Beryl's luck was out; no such opportunity occurred.

Over tea Pamela gave Beryl a long account of her home and people, and then began making inquiries about Beryl's home. But Beryl was strangely reticent, and only stated a few bald facts. She was an orphan, she said; no brothers—no sisters—and her father and mother had been dead many

years; her aunt, with whom she lived, had her home just outside London—at Enfield. Beryl said she had never been to boarding-school; no, she didn't go out much—didn't know many people—they lived very quietly—and so on. From Beryl's manner Pamela gathered that she did not wish to discuss her home or aunt, so the matter was dropped, and Pamela suggested that when tea was over they should ask Martha or Ellen to show them over the house, so that they would know their way about.

Both Martha and Ellen professed themselves delighted to show them over the house, and so both of them accompanied the two girls on a tour of inspection. Martha, who liked to do things thoroughly while she was about it, insisted on them seeing every room and cupboard from top to bottom of the house, with the exception, of course, of the locked-up room at the end of the first floor landing.

On this landing there were five rooms: the locked-up room ran right across the front of the house, the locked door being opposite the stair-head; on either side of the landing were two rooms—all four to be used as bedrooms for the girls, each having a separate room to herself. The rooms allotted to Pamela and Isobel Prior were on the left, Isobel's adjoining the locked room; Beryl's room was opposite to Pamela's, and her next-door neighbour was to be Caroline Weston.

Another flight of stairs, starting near by Beryl's door, led up to Martha's and Ellen's rooms, the bath-room and airing cupboards, and another spare bedroom.

The ground floor included the dining-room (which we have already seen) and, on the opposite side of the hall, a large drawing-room with French windows that led into the garden. Next door to the dining-room, and at the back of the house, was a queer little room with books all round the walls, a huge writing-desk (much too large for the rest of the furniture), half a dozen odd chairs, an old spinning-wheel, and a glass cabinet full of curiosities. This was called the 'study,' Martha said, where Miss Crabingway read or attended to her correspondence; but, in spite of the books, it looked more like an interesting museum of odds and ends. A spacious kitchen and scullery with a big larder, and a cosy little sitting-room, leading out of the kitchen, and set apart for the use of Martha and Ellen, completed the ground floor.

There seemed to be a good many windows in each room, so it ought to be a light house in the daytime, Pamela thought; otherwise her first impression of sombre richness was strengthened after seeing over the rest of the house. The furniture and fittings were all good and heavy-looking; the walls were everywhere crowded with pictures—some originals, some copies of well-known pictures, and some photographic picture studies of people and places. There were carpets and dark furniture in every room. And what struck Pamela as being very strange was that each room in the house had at least one odd-sized piece of furniture in it—either much too large or much too small to be in keeping with the rest of the room; and this particular piece, in each case, seemed to occupy a very prominent position, so that one couldn't help noticing it. It reminded Pamela of the doll's house belonging to Olive at home, where the doll's kettle and saucepan were the same size as the chairs, and too big to stand on the doll's kitchen stove. She wondered how Miss Crabingway had come to possess these odd bits of furniture, and was just looking at the extraordinarily small piano-stool set before the huge grand piano in the drawing-room, when a sudden ring at the bell announced a fresh arrival, and Martha hurried out of the room to open the front door.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROOM WITH THE LOCKED DOOR

Isobel Prior and Caroline Weston had arrived together, having travelled in the same railway carriage, each ignorant of the fact that the other was bound for Chequertrees, until the waiting cab at the station had made this known to them.

"I'm simply *dead*," were the first words Pamela heard as she came out of the drawing-room to greet the new-comer. The speaker was a well-dressed, fluffy-haired girl with an aristocratic voice and bearing, who was standing in the hall amid a pile of luggage.

"Why, that sounds a cheerful beginning! Who is it that's dead?" asked Pamela laughingly, as she came forward.

The girl stared rather haughtily at Pamela for a second, then smiled and shook hands.

"Oh, I suppose you are Miss Heath," she said. "I am Miss Prior. I've had a perfectly impossible journey here to-day, and I'm simply fagged out and perishingly cold."

"We must get you something hot to drink," said Pamela, "and you must have a good rest. Would you like to come straight into the dining-room and have a warm—there's a lovely fire there—or would you rather go up to your bedroom first?"

"Oh, *please*—a wash and tidy up first," said Isobel. "I must look such a fright—"

And then Pamela noticed that another girl was standing beside Martha, just inside the front door. A big plush curtain in the hall almost hid her from view.

"I'm awfully sorry—I didn't see anyone else had arrived," said Pamela. "Are you—are you Miss Caroline Weston?"

The girl gazed stolidly at Pamela—a heavily-made girl, plumpish, and wearing spectacles; she carried a very neat handbag in one hand and a very neatly rolled umbrella in the other hand.

"Y-e-s," she said, in a slow, drawling voice.

Pamela shook her warmly by the hand, and then offered to take the two girls upstairs and show them their rooms. As they passed the drawing-room door Pamela caught sight of Beryl, who was waiting shyly in the background, and she immediately introduced her to the others.

"Beryl and I have just been shown over the house," Pamela explained. "We only arrived to-day, of course—a few hours ago—I expect you're too tired to want to bother to see all round to-night, and if you are you must go over it in the morning. Then we shall all know our way about, shan't we? Come along, Beryl, let's take these poor weary travellers up to their rooms. And, Martha, can we have some hot supper—in about twenty minutes, please?"

Once again the house was astir with the bustle of welcoming the latest arrivals. Martha vanished into the kitchen to prepare something hot and tasty for supper, while Ellen hurried to and fro with warm water for washing, and carried boxes and parcels upstairs, and lit gases, and pulled down blinds, and generally made herself useful, while Pamela, followed by Beryl, showed Isobel and Caroline to their rooms, doing her best as hostess to make them feel comfortable and at home.

Over supper the four girls became better acquainted. Naturally they were all very curious to know why Miss Crabingway had invited the four of them to Chequertrees, and they studied each other with interest, trying to find an answer to the riddle. Following Pamela's friendly lead they talked of themselves, and their homes, and the journey to Barrowfield. That is, all of them talked a good deal with the exception of Beryl, who still seemed very shy and only spoke when she was addressed directly.

Pamela was in one of her 'beamy' moods that night. She beamed and laughed and talked and thoroughly enjoyed herself during supper, not a little excited by all the strange surroundings and the strange new acquaintances she was making; perhaps it was her genuine interest in everything and

everybody that made her so jolly a companion—and so unself-conscious a one. Anyway, she liked girls—nearly all girls—and they liked her as a rule. Of course she had her dislikes, but on the whole she got on very well with girls of her own age. How was she going to like and get on with these girls, all about her own age, who were sitting at supper with her this evening, she asked herself.

She felt vaguely sorry for Beryl, as if she wanted to protect her, because Beryl seemed so painfully shy and ill at ease; her clothes were cheap-looking and unsuitable for the time of year.

Isobel seemed to Pamela to be slightly disdainful of everything and everybody; she had a habit of over-emphasizing unimportant words when she talked, and appeared at times to exaggerate too much. Her clothes were well chosen and evidently of very good material, and well tailored. Her features, framed by her pretty, fluffy hair, were clear-cut and refined; she would have been a pretty girl had it not been for her eyes, which were deep-set and a trifle too close together. She talked a good deal about her 'mater' and 'pater,' and her brother Gerald and his motor-car.

Caroline, beside Isobel, looked very plain, and almost dowdy, in spite of the fact that her clothes were good—the reason being that her clothes did not suit her at all. She had no idea how to make the best of herself; her one great idea was to be neat at all costs. Her drab-coloured hair was brushed back smoothly, in a most trying fashion; and never by any chance would she have a button or hook missing from any of her clothing, nor a hole in her stocking—and this was a credit to her, because she worked as slowly with her needle as she did with everything else, though it must be owned that she was very fond of sewing. Very slow, very methodical, very neat—such was Caroline. "I believe she even dusts and wraps up in tissue paper each needle and pin and reel of cotton after she has finished with it," was Isobel's opinion after she had known her a week; and although this may sound like one of Isobel's exaggerated remarks, yet it was nearer the truth than she herself dreamt when she said it.

What acquaintance had Miss Crabingway had with these three girls, Pamela wondered. And what had made her choose them—and herself. They made an oddly assorted quartette.

As they were rising from the supper-table she asked them whether any of them knew Miss Crabingway well, and learnt to her surprise that none of them had more than the slightest acquaintance with her. Neither Isobel nor Caroline could remember ever seeing Miss Crabingway, and Beryl said vaguely that she had seen her once—a long time ago. Beryl said she believed that her mother had been a friend of Miss Crabingway's, many years back. Isobel said her mater had met Miss Crabingway abroad—had happened to stay in the same hotel—about six years ago. An uncle of Caroline's, so she informed them, had once done some business transactions with Miss Crabingway, and had corresponded with her since, at intervals.

"Well, I can't make it out at all," thought Pamela to herself. "Why Miss Crabingway should have invited us—four girls—practically strangers to her—to come and stay at her house while she is away.... I can't see any reason for it.... Anyway, I suppose we shall know when she returns."

The supper having considerably revived Isobel, she said she would like to see over the house before she went to bed; and Caroline, having no objection ready against this suggestion (except that she was half asleep in her chair), found herself joining in this tour of inspection and stolidly taking stock of the house that was to be her home for the next six months.

In a whispered aside to Pamela Isobel pronounced the dining-room wall-paper 'hideous' and the drawing-room decorations 'perfectly awful'—both remarks being overhead by Ellen, who glared at the back of Isobel's head in silent indignation at this reflection on her mistress's taste. It was certainly not good manners on Isobel's part, but she was not over-sensitive about other people's feelings, and was rarely aware of the fact when her words or tone of voice had hurt or given offence.

On the first floor landing Pamela pointed out the locked door. The girls knew that they were forbidden to try to open it, or look through the keyhole, their instructions being the same as Pamela's.

"And to think that one little action—just kneeling down and putting your eye to the keyhole—would make you lose fifty pounds!" exclaimed Isobel. "It's not worth losing all that money just for curiosity, is it?"

"Rather not," said Pamela. "I vote that we all keep away from that door as if the paint on it were poisonous to touch."

"I'm sorry my room's next to it," Isobel went on, "but it doesn't really matter—though I like to keep as far away from temptation as I can ... not that I *want* to look inside, but—you know the feeling—just because I know I mustn't—"

"I know the feeling," agreed Pamela. "But don't you think it would be wisest not to talk about it any more, or we shall all be dreaming about it to-night."

Ellen, who was leading the way up to the top floor where her own room and Martha's room were situated, pricked up her ears at this.

"Dreams go by contrary," she said to herself mechanically, and, apparently, without meaning. Besides being a mine of information on melancholy events, Ellen was a great believer in dreams, possessing as many as ten 'dream books,' which she consulted frequently on the meaning of her dreams. Ellen believed also in fortune-telling by tea-leaves, and lucky stars, and the like. And many a time she had made even Martha—who knew her little ways and generally laughed tolerantly at her—turn 'goose-flesh' at the terrible fate she would read out for Martha and herself from the tea-leaves left in their cups.

"Do you believe it's possible to *dream* what is inside that room—I mean dream truly—if you set your mind on it just before going to sleep?" Isobel asked of Pamela, as she glanced round the bath-room.

Caroline, who was examining everything in the bath-room closely and minutely, as was her habit, raised her head as if to speak, but Pamela, who had her back turned to her and did not see her mouth open, replied:

"I don't know. I'm afraid I'm not an expert on dreams—I hardly ever dream myself."

"Wouldn't it be fun," suggested Isobel, as they all made their way downstairs again, "if each of us tried hard to dream what was inside the room—and then tell each other what dreams we had had, in the morning—and when Miss Crabingway comes back we will see if any of us are right."

"Oh, I don't know," said Pamela. "Somehow I don't think we'd better even try to dream what is inside the room. Perhaps it isn't quite fair to—to—I don't know how to put it— Anyway, I think it would be better if we left the subject entirely alone, don't you?"

Again Caroline opened her mouth and was about to say something, when Isobel burst in with,

"Oh, but Miss Crabingway didn't say we were not to *dream* about it, did she? ... That would be impossible to forbid... But still, perhaps it's best not to meddle with the subject. It's not worth losing fifty pounds over, anyway."

Beryl, although she had accompanied the others over the house, had not spoken a word since they left the dining-room, but she had listened to all that was going on with much interest. Here was another girl, Isobel, who seemed quite at home among strangers in a strange house, thought Beryl; but she did not envy Isobel; she was vaguely afraid of her. Caroline appeared more at her ease than Beryl had expected her to be; though Caroline seemed to others slow and awkward, she was not aware of this herself, and so was not made uneasy on that score. Caroline did not know her own failings, while Beryl was keenly alive to *herown*—and suffered accordingly.

As the four girls bid each other good-night a few minutes later, Caroline found the opportunity she had been waiting for, and mentioned something that had been fidgeting her since her arrival.

"Oh—er—do you know if my room has been well aired?" she asked slowly, reminding Pamela irresistibly of an owl as she gazed solemnly through her spectacles. "I'm rather subject to chills—and mother told me to be sure and see that my bedroom had been well aired."

Fortunately Martha was able to assure her on this point, and Caroline went upstairs apparently content. But before she went to sleep she thoroughly fingered the sheets and pillow-cases to satisfy herself that Martha was a strictly truthful person.

When, at length, every one had retired and all was quiet, a little breeze arose in the garden and scurried round the house, whispering excitedly among the ivy leaves. But though the breeze ruffled and agitated the cloak of ivy, it had no power to stir the old house beneath, which stood, grim and unmoved, brooding in silence over the strangers within its walls.

## CHAPTER V

### MAKING PLANS

In the morning, as soon as breakfast was over, Pamela held an informal 'council meeting' in the drawing-room.

"I thought we'd better just talk over some sort of plan for organizing things, so that we shall all be as comfortable as possible," she said, leaning her elbow on the small round table before her and resting her chin in the palm of her hand. "You see, it isn't as if there was a real hostess here—you know what I mean—it isn't as if we could drop into the ordinary life of the household. Here we are—four strangers yesterday, four acquaintances to-day—and we've got to live and work and play together for the next six months. Now what are the best arrangements to make, so that we'll all have a good time? It's left entirely in our hands. Anybody got any suggestions?" She looked smilingly round at the other three girls.

Isobel was the only one who answered.

"Of course we didn't know *what* we should be expected to do when we came here," she said. "It was all such an *awful* hurry and scramble—there was no time to think of anything."

"I know," agreed Pamela. "But now we are here, we'd better have some sort of plan, don't you think—so as to leave each other as free as possible—I do hate tying people down to time and—things—but we'll have to have some sort of arrangements about meals, for instance, or else we'll keep Martha and Ellen busy all day long. Luckily, we've got hardly any housekeeping difficulties. I had a talk with Martha and Ellen this morning, before breakfast, and they're going on with their work just as usual. Martha does all the cooking and washing, and Ellen does the general work. But I expect four girls in the house will make a good bit of difference! So I propose that we each make our own bed and tidy our own room every morning—and Ellen will clean the rooms out once a week. It won't take each of us long of a morning. What do you say?"

Beryl agreed at once; and Isobel, though she said she wasn't *used* to doing housework, promised to do her best; Caroline was understood to say she preferred making her own bed because other people never made a bed to her satisfaction.

Having settled this little point, Pamela went on:

"As regards shopping—Martha says she always sees about getting in provisions, but she would like us to say what we'd like for breakfasts, and dinners, and so on. She says Miss Emily Crabingway left a sum of money with her for purchasing enough food for the next three months; after that time has elapsed, Mr Joseph Sigglesthorne is to send on a further sum—enough for the final three months. You see that's all arranged for us; but we've got to choose the meals, and I thought it would be a good plan if we took it in turns, each week—first one, then the other—to draw up a list of meals for the week. Write it all out, and take it in to Martha. What do you think? Martha likes the idea."

"I'm quite willing, but I don't believe I could think of enough variety for a week straight off," said Beryl.

"Oh, yes, you could," said Pamela, "with the help of Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book—there are no end of hints in there. Martha has a copy of the book on a shelf in the kitchen; she'll lend it to us. She says it's very useful, but rather too extravagant for her liking, with its 'break eight eggs and beat them well,' and 'take ten eggs' and 'take six eggs' and so on. Martha says she always looks up a recipe in Mrs Beeton's, and then makes it her own way (which is always quite different)."

"As long as you don't choose boiled haddock every morning," said Isobel, "and don't give us lamb chops and mashed potatoes every dinner-time—with rice pudding to follow—I'm sure we'll none of us try to assassinate you on the quiet."

"I don't mind taking my turn at choosing the meals," said Caroline, thinking tenderly of suet roly-poly.

"And I'll do what I can," remarked Isobel, more in her element when choosing work for others to perform than in doing work herself. She had momentary visions of how she would astonish the others by the magnificence of her menus; none of the 'homely' dishes for Isobel; with the aid of Mrs Beeton, who knows what might not be accomplished in the way of exclusive and awe-inspiring dishes. "But *you* choose the first week's meals, *do*," she begged Pamela.

As this suggestion was proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously by the others, Pamela agreed, and so the matter was settled.

"Having now disposed of our housekeeping duties," Pamela laughed, "now what are we going to do with the rest of our time? Had any of you any idea of keeping up studies, or attending classes, or anything of that sort? You see we are left idle—to act entirely on our own initiative—without any suggestions or arrangements whatever on Miss Crabingway's part. And I know that, speaking for myself, I don't want to idle away the next six months."

"I shouldn't mind being idle," observed Isobel. "In fact mater said the six months' rest would do me no harm. I was just going back to college, you know, when we heard from Miss Crabingway—and of course all my plans were upset—but I didn't mind so much with the prospect of a lovely, lazy holiday at Barrowfield. But still, if you are all going to take up some sort of work, I suppose I must, as well.... I should be bored to death with my own company—if you are all going to work."

"I only suggest a few hours' work each day," reminded Pamela. "It makes the day seem so much more satisfactory when one has *done* something."

The question of what to study, and how to study, gave much food for discussion; but the subject was prevented from taking too serious a turn by Isobel's constant stream of facetious remarks on the kind of work she would take up. She seemed to think it a huge joke; though Caroline, who was apt to take things literally, was much perturbed at the numerous studies Isobel proposed, until she realized that Isobel was only making fun all the time.

"I should prefer to keep up my music," said Beryl, presently. "And study hard at theory, harmony, and counterpoint—and if it wouldn't annoy anyone—perhaps I could practise on the piano here. I—I should love that."

"Of course it wouldn't annoy anyone, would it?" Pamela appealed to the other two, who said that it certainly wouldn't annoy them.

"It isn't as if it were the five-finger exercise—thump—thump—thump," added Caroline cautiously.

"Well, we should *hope* you'd got beyond that," said Isobel to Beryl, who flushed nervously.

"Oh, yes," she hastened to assure them.

"There are worse things than the five-finger exercise," broke in Pamela. "I have a sister at home who knows *one* piece, and whenever she gets near the piano she sits down and plays it—thumps it, I should say—because she 'knows we love it,' she says. We always howl at her, on principle, and the nearest of us swoops down on her, and bears her, protesting, out of the room."

The others laughed with Pamela at this recollection of hers, and attention was distracted from Beryl, much to her relief.

"Well," said Pamela, "for myself—I am going to do a heap of reading—especially historical books; and I want most of all to continue my sketching. I'm very fond of dabbling in black and white sketching—and I want lots of practice. I've brought with me some books about it—to study."

"Oh, you *energetic* people," yawned Isobel. "It makes me tired to think of the work you're going to do."

"What are you going to do?" Pamela asked, turning to Caroline.

"Well," drawled Caroline, "I like doing needlework better than anything."

Isobel put her handkerchief to her mouth to hide a smile. Fortunately Caroline was not looking at her, but Beryl was. Caroline went on undisturbed.

"I'm not fond of reading or books, but I've been thinking—if there were any classes near by, on dressmaking—cutting out and all that, you know—that I could attend, I wouldn't mind that; but anyway I've got plenty of plain needlework to go on with. I brought a dozen handkerchiefs in my box to hem and embroider—and I've got a tray-cloth to hem-stitch."

"Mind you don't overtax your brain, my dear," muttered Isobel, giggling into her handkerchief.

"Eh?" asked Caroline, not catching her remark.

"Nothing," said Isobel. "I was only wondering what work I could do."

"I daresay you'll be able to find some dress-making classes, Caroline," said Pamela. "We'll go out and buy a local paper and see what's going on. But, Isobel, what are *you* going to do?" Pamela asked, looking across at Isobel.

"Ah me!" sighed Isobel. "Well, if I must decide, I'll decide on dancing. I'm frightfully keen on dancing, you know. I'll attend classes for that if you like—that is, if there are such things as dancing classes in this sleepy little place.... I might do a bit of photography too. I didn't bring my camera—but perhaps I can buy a new one—it's great fun taking snapshots."

"If there are no classes in Barrowfield there is almost sure to be a town within a few miles, where we can get what we want," Pamela said.

Matters now being settled as far as was possible at the present moment, Pamela said she was going out to look round the village, and Isobel immediately said she would go with her as she wanted to buy some buttons for her gloves. Beryl would have liked to go with Pamela, but felt sensitive about visiting the village for the first time in Isobel's company—for more than one reason; so she said she would go and unpack her box and get her music books out, and look round the village later on. Caroline also elected to stay and unpack and put her room in order. So Pamela and Isobel started off together.

They had been gone but five minutes when the post arrived with a registered letter addressed to Pamela.

"Ah," said Martha knowingly, as she laid the letter in the tray on the hall-stand.

## CHAPTER VI

### MILLICENT JACKSON GIVES SOME INFORMATION

"What a one-eyed sort of place this is," said Isobel inelegantly, as she came out of the village drapery establishment and joined Pamela, who was waiting on the green outside.

"I was just thinking how charming the little village looks," said Pamela, "clustering round this wide stretch of green with the pond and the ducks. And look at the lanes and hills and woods rising in the background! It *is* picturesque."

"Oh, it may be frightfully picturesque and all that," Isobel replied, "but picturesqueness won't provide one with black pearl buttons to sew on one's gloves. Would you believe it—not one of these *impossible* shops keeps such things. 'Black pearl buttons, miss. I'm sorry we haven't any in stock. Black *bone*—would black bone do—or a fancy button, miss?'" Isobel mimicked the voice of the 'creature' (as she called her) who served in the tiny draper's shop.

"Well, I suppose they're not often asked for black pearl," said Pamela, as they moved on. "And wouldn't black bone do?"

"Black *bone*!" said Isobel disdainfully.

"Well, you can't expect to find Oxford Street shops down here in Barrowfield," smiled Pamela. "And it's jolly lucky there aren't such shops, or Barrowfield would be a *town* to-morrow. Still, is there anywhere else you'd like to try?"

"No, I shan't bother any more to-day," Isobel sighed. "I did want them—but I'll wear my other gloves till I can get the buttons to match the two I've lost.... How people do *stare* at one here. Look at that old woman over there—And, oh, do look at the butcher standing on his step *glaring* at us! He looks as if his eyes might go off 'pop' at any moment, doesn't he?"

Although Isobel pretended to be annoyed, she really rather enjoyed the attention she and Pamela were attracting. Naturally the village was curious about these strange young ladies who had come to stay at Miss Crabingway's house. Thomas Bagg had given his version of the arrivals last night as he chatted with the landlord of the 'Blue Boar,' and had professed to know more about the matter than he actually did. In acting thus he was not alone, for most of the village pretended to know something of the reason why Miss Emily Crabingway had suddenly gone away, and why her house was occupied by four strange young ladies. In reality nobody knew much about it at all. It speaks well for Martha and Ellen that they were not persuaded to tell more than they did; maybe they didn't know more; maybe they *did*, but wouldn't say. The village gossips shook their heads at the closeness of these two trusted servants concerning their mistress's affairs.... And so Pamela and Isobel attracted more than the usual attention bestowed on strangers in Barrowfield—the bolder folk (like the butcher) staring unabashed from their front doors, while the more retiring peeped through their curtains.

Barrowfield itself was certainly very picturesque; no wonder it appealed to Pamela's artistic eye. Surrounded by tree-clad hills, the village lay jumbled about the wide green—in the centre of which was a pond with ducks on it; white-washed cottages, old houses, quaint little shops, and inns with thatched roofs, stood side by side in an irregular circle. Seen from one of the neighbouring hills you might have fancied that Barrowfield was having a game of Ring-o'-Roses around the green, while the little odd cottages dotted here and there on the hill-sides looked longingly on, like children who have not been invited to play but who might at any moment run down the slopes and join in. The square-towered church and the Manor House, both on a hill outside the magic ring, stood watching like dignified grown-up people.

Chequertrees was one of the biggest houses in the circle around the green, and a few dozen yards beyond its gate a steep tree-lined avenue led up to the big house of the neighbourhood—the Manor House, where lived the owners of most of the land and property in Barrowfield. The Manor

House was about a quarter of a mile beyond the village, and stood half-way up the avenue, at the top of which was the square-towered church. Close beside the church, but so hidden among trees as to be invisible until you were near at hand, was the snug vicarage.

The railway station at which the girls had arrived on the previous evening was a mile and a half away on a road that led out from the opposite end of the green to where Chequertrees stood. Several lanes climbed up from the green and wound over the hills to towns and villages beyond—the nearest market town being four miles distant if you went by the lane, six miles if you followed the main road that ran past the station.

Of course Pamela and Isobel would not have known all this on their first short walk round Barrowfield had they not fallen into conversation with the girl who served in the newsagent's, and who was only too ready to impart information to them when they went in to buy a local newspaper. She was a large-boned girl with a lot of big teeth, that showed conspicuously when she talked; she eyed curiously, and not without envy, the well-cut clothes and 'stylish' hats that the two girls were wearing.

Pamela noticed that the girl wore a brooch made of gold-wire twisted into the name 'Millicent,' and as 'Jackson' was the name painted over the shop outside, she tacked it on, in her own mind, as Millicent's surname.

It being still early in the day Millicent Jackson's toilet was not properly finished—that is to say, she did not appear as she would later on about tea-time, with her hair frizzed up and wearing her brown serge skirt and afternoon blouse. Her morning attire was a very unsatisfactory affair. Millicent wore all her half-soiled blouses in the mornings, and her hair was straight and untidily pinned up; she had a black apron over her skirt, and her hands, which were not pretty at the best of times, looked big and red, and they were streaked with blacking as if she had recently been cleaning a stove. Poor Millicent, she found it impossible to do the housework and appear trim and tidy in the shop at the same time. She discovered herself suddenly wishing that the young ladies had postponed their visit till the afternoon, when she would have been dressed. But there were compensations even for being 'caught untidy'; for could she not see that young Agnes Jones across the way peering out of her shop door, overcome with curiosity, and would she not dash across to Millicent as soon as the young ladies had departed, to know all about the interview! So it was with mixed feelings that Millicent kept the young ladies talking as long as she could.

"Yes, it's a vurry ole church, and vurry interestin'," said Millicent for the third time. "But uv course you ain't been in these parts long enough, miss, for you to 'ave seen everything yet, 'ave you, miss?"

"No, we only arrived last night," said Pamela in a friendly way.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Millicent in great astonishment; although Thomas Bagg had been in the shop a few hours back and told her all about their arrival. "Oh, well, uv course, miss—!" she broke off and waited expectantly.

But Pamela's next remark was disappointing.

"I think it's an awfully interesting-looking village altogether," she said. "Whereabouts is the ruined mill you mentioned just now? Very far from the village? I wonder if we have time to go and see it this morning."

"It's a goodish way," said Millicent reluctantly. "Well, about two mile over that way," she pointed toward the back of the shop. "Along the lane that goes through the fields.... I expect you'd find it vurry muddy in the lane after all the rain we've been 'aving."

"Oh, I don't mind that," said Pamela, but Isobel wrinkled up her nose and looked down at her dainty shoes. "But have we time before lunch—um—no, it's half-past twelve now—what a shame! ... Never mind! I must go along to-morrow if I can. I feel I don't want to use up all the country too quickly—it's so nice exploring." She smiled at Millicent, and gathered up the papers she had bought.

"Oh, by the way, who lives at the Manor House?" asked Isobel, addressing Millicent, directly, for the first time; her voice was slightly condescending—it was the voice she always adopted

unconsciously when addressing those she considered her 'inferiors'; she did not mean to be unkind—she had been taught, by those who should have known better, to talk like that to servants and tradespeople. But Pamela, whose upbringing had been very different, frowned as she heard the tones; they jarred on her.

However, Millicent did not seem to notice anything amiss.

"Sir Henry and Lady Prior, miss," answered Millicent.

Isobel raised her eyebrows and gave a short laugh. "Prior! That's strange! I wonder if they're any relation to me," she said to Pamela. "I must try to find out." She turned to Millicent again. "Sir Henry Prior, you said?"

"Yes, miss," said Millicent, looking at Isobel with fresh interest. (Here was a choice tit-bit to tell Aggie Jones.)

"H'm," said Isobel. "Yes—I know pater had a cousin Henry—I shouldn't be at *all* surprised—Wouldn't it be delightful, Pamela, if it turns out to be this cousin—"

She broke off, feeling that until she was sure it would be wiser not to talk too much before Millicent, who was listening, with wide eyes and open mouth. To say just so much, and no more, was agreeably pleasant to Isobel, and made her feel as though, to the rest of the world, she was now enveloped in an air of romantic mystery. As far as Millicent represented the world, this was true. Millicent at once scented romance and mystery—for surely to be related to a titled person, and not to know it, is mysteriously romantic! She looked at Isobel with greater respect.... Pamela's voice brought her suddenly back to the everyday world again—the shop, the papers, and the fact that she was untidy and not dressed; she noticed with sudden distaste the blacking on her hands and hid them under her apron.

"Who lives in that pretty little white cottage opposite to Chequertrees?" Pamela was asking. "I'm sure it must be some one artistic—it's all so pleasing to the eye—it took my fancy this morning as I came out."

"The little white cottage—" began Millicent.

"With the brown shutters," finished Pamela.

"Oh, yes, I know the one you mean, miss," said Millicent. "Mrs Gresham lives there, miss. I don't know that she's an artist—she lets apartments in the summer—and has teas in the garden, miss. Does vurry nicely in the season with visitors, but she's terrible took up with rheumatics in the winter—has it something chronic, she does. But she's a nice, respectable person—always has her daily paper reg'lar from us."

"Her garden must look lovely in the summer," remarked Pamela. "There are some fine old Scotch fir trees in it, I noticed." She had already taken note of these particular trees by the cottage, for sketching later on; they were the only Scotch firs that she had seen in Barrowfield so far.

As she and Isobel walked across the green on their way back to Chequertrees the picturesque blacksmith's forge claimed her attention, and she stopped to admire it. As she did so a woman came down the lane beside the forge, and passing in front of the two girls walked quickly over the green. Pamela's attention was immediately attracted to her, firstly because she was carrying an easel (also a basket, and a bag, evidently containing a flat box); secondly, because she was dressed very quaintly in a grey cloak and a small grey hat of original design; thirdly, because she went into the garden gate of the little white cottage opposite Chequertrees; and lastly, because, as the woman turned to latch the gate after her, Pamela caught sight of her face.

"Who *does* she remind me of?" said Pamela. "I'm sure I've seen some one like her—"

But Isobel was not listening to Pamela.

"If Sir Henry Prior is related to us, mater will be frightfully interested to hear what—"

But Pamela was not listening to Isobel.

"Oh, p'r'aps she doesn't live there then—I wonder," said Pamela, as the woman in grey, after handing the basket in at the front door of the cottage and speaking a few words to somebody inside,

who was invisible to Pamela, came quickly out of the gate again and hurried away down the village, the easel under one arm and the bag under the other.

"Who *does* she remind me of?" puzzled Pamela, as she and Isobel turned in at the gate of Chequertrees.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **BERYL GOES THROUGH AN ORDEAL**

When Pamela opened the registered envelope that was waiting for her she found inside twelve pounds in postal orders, and a short note from Mr Joseph Sigglesworth informing her that Miss Crabingway had desired him to send this pocket-money for her to share between 'the three other young ladies' and herself. That was three pounds each—the pocket-money for the next three months. To those girls who already had some pocket-money in their purses this little addition came as a pleasant, though not unduly exciting, surprise; to those who had little or no money of their own the three pounds was very welcome indeed.

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