

THE GIRLS OF CHEQUERTREES

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THE GIRLS OF CHEQUERTREES

BY



PAMELA READ THE SIGNATURE OF BERYL'S MOTHER
THROUGH A BLUR OF TEARS

Fr.

[P. 120]

*PAMELA READ THE SIGNATURE OF BERYL'S MOTHER THROUGH
A BLUR OF TEARS (P. 120)*

MARION ST JOHN WEBB

AUTHOR OF

'THE LITTLEST ONE' 'THE LITTLEST ONE AGAIN' 'KNOCK THREE TIMES'
'THE HOUSE WITH THE TWISTING PASSAGE'

ETC.

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A WOMAN WHO FROWNEED AND PUT HER FOREFINGER TO HER LIPS

A PAILFUL OF GARDEN RUBBISH DESCENDED IN A SHOWER

THE GIRLS OF CHEQUERTREES

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 chap-

ter, 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, empha-

sizing 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 Sigglesythorne 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 Sigglesythorne's magnificent forehead, and did not move. Before any of them could speak Mr Sigglesythorne 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 Sigglesythorne 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 Sigglesythorne 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 Sigglesythorne's apologies and thanks for his hat were profuse.

At length, after going through five pockets, Mr Sigglesythorne 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 Siggleshorne, 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 Siggleshorne, 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 Siggleshorne 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 Sigglesythorne, handing Pamela a thumbed and dog-eared visiting-card on which was printed: "Joseph Sigglesythorne, 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 Siglesthorpe.

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 cab-man. 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 today, 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, fluff-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 mother 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



ON THE FIRST FLOOR LANDING PAMELA POINTED OUT
THE LOCKED DOOR

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*ON THE FIRST FLOOR LANDING PAMELA POINTED OUT THE
LOCKED DOOR*

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 *her* own—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—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

MILLCENT 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 Sigglesthorne 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.

Pamela shared out the money, wrote a note of acknowledgment to Mr Sigglesthorne, and then retired into the 'study,' after dinner was over, with a copy of Mrs Beeton, a paper and pencil, and a business-like frown on her face.

"Nobody must disturb me for half an hour," she said, in mock solemnity, "for I am going to do most important work—make out a week's list of *meals*."

Caroline was not likely to disturb anyone, as she had betaken herself upstairs to her bedroom again to continue arranging her belongings. The morning had not been long enough for her to finish unpacking properly, she said.

Beryl, who besides being quicker than Caroline had also less to unpack, had finished her room long ago; so this afternoon she wandered into the drawing-room, and closing the door after her carefully, crossed over to the piano.

The drawing-room with its long French windows leading into the garden was about the pleasantest room in the house. It was lighter than most of the other rooms, and there were fewer hangings about, which was a good thing for the piano, Beryl thought. "I wonder if it would disturb anyone if I played," she said to herself, opening the piano and stroking the keys with her fingers. The house seemed suddenly so quiet—she hardly liked to break the silence; she feared somebody coming in to see who was playing, for Beryl was nervous at playing before others, although she loved music and could play very well. She would have to make a beginning *some time*, she told herself, if she really meant to practise—so why not now? But still she hesitated, her fingers outstretched on the keys.

She could hear faintly, the sound being muffled behind closed doors, the clatter of dishes in the kitchen—Martha and Ellen washing up. Pamela was in the study, she knew, and Caroline was upstairs; but where was Isobel? Beryl wished she knew where Isobel was. She had a dread of Isobel coming in to disturb her, and she would be sure to come, out of curiosity, if she heard the piano.... Beryl felt suddenly annoyed with herself. Why should she care who came in—if she really *meant* to practise—

Beryl began to play—softly at first; but as she became gradually absorbed

in the music, her touch grew firmer and the notes rang out clearly, and she forgot all about anyone hearing—forgot everything but the music. The only time Beryl quite lost her self-consciousness was when she was playing or listening to music.

She played on, happily absorbed, when suddenly her former fears were realized; the door handle clicked and some one put her head round the door.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Isobel's voice; and Isobel pushed the door open and came in.

Beryl stopped playing, and swung round on the stool.

"This room's not so bad when one gets used to it," said Isobel, walking across to the French window and pushing the curtains back; she stood looking out into the garden. "Anyway, it's better than that perfectly hideous dining-room. What awful taste Miss Crabingway must have! I really don't know whether I shall be able to endure it for six whole months." She threw herself on the couch beside the window and yawned.

Isobel felt rather bored this afternoon. Caroline was still unpacking—besides, who wanted to talk to Caroline?—Pamela was still busy, and waved threateningly to anyone who looked into the study, keeping her eyes fixed on Mrs Beeton. There was no one but Beryl to talk to. Isobel was rather curious about Beryl, because she seemed so unwilling to talk about herself and her home.

"I suppose you learnt music at college?" Isobel observed, studying Beryl's slight, stooping figure, as she sat with her back to the piano, her pale face gazing rather anxiously at her questioner.

"No—oh, no," said Beryl.

"Did you have a music master—or mistress—at home, then?"

"No," said Beryl. "Mother taught me a little—and I—and I picked up the rest for myself."

Isobel raised her eyebrows.

"We had a frightfully handsome music-master at our college at Rugford," said Isobel. "Most of the girls raved over him—but I'm not so keen on Roman noses myself... What college are you at?"

"Oh ... Just a school—near where we live—at Enfield," replied Beryl; and Isobel saw to her surprise that Beryl was blushing.

"You've never been away from home then—to boarding-school?" Isobel suggested.

Beryl shook her head.

"Oh, it's great sport," said Isobel. "But you want plenty of spare cash to stand midnight feasts to the other girls, and have a bit of fun. Pater and Gerald used to come down in the car and fetch me home for week-ends sometimes, by special permission; and sometimes one or two of the girls would be invited to come with me. The girls were awfully keen on getting invitations to our place;

they used to 'chum-up' to me, and really almost beg for invitations. And you should have heard them simply rave about Gerald.... There was one girl, I remember, who practically implored me to ask her home for the holidays—but she wasn't a lady—I don't know how she managed to get into the college—the Head was awfully particular as a rule. This girl was only there one term, though, and then the Head wrote and told her people that she could not continue at the college— Well, what do you think they found out about her? ... She was a *Council* school girl! And her parents said she had been educated 'privately' at home! I suppose her father had scraped up a little money and wanted her to finish off at our college—to get a sort of polish. But we weren't having any— Good gracious! What a colour you've got!" she broke off, and gazed at Beryl, whose cheeks were scarlet.

"It's—I'm rather hot," said Beryl. "What are 'midnight feasts'?" she asked hurriedly.

"Oh, they're picnics we have in the dormitories after all the lights are out and we're supposed to be in bed," Isobel explained, still eyeing Beryl curiously. "We choose a moonlight night, or else smuggle in a couple of night-lights with the cake, and fruit, and chocolates. It's frightfully exciting—because at any moment we may get caught."

"What happens if you are?" inquired Beryl.

"Well—we never were—not while I was there.... I wonder if I shall go back for a term or two when my visit here is ended?" Isobel mused.

"Will you be going back again to your school after you leave here?"

"No, I don't think so," said Beryl, who was now quite pale again.

"Did you get up to any larks? Were there any boarders at your school?" Isobel persisted.

"No," Beryl answered. "It was only a day school. We didn't have any special larks."

"Didn't you like the school?"

"Not very much. It was all right."

"Why? Weren't the girls nice?"

"Oh, they were nice enough," said Beryl. "It was a nice school. But nothing specially exciting ever happened. Just work."

"Um ... I shouldn't have liked that," said Isobel. "By the way, your father and mother are dead, aren't they?"

Beryl nodded.

"Many years ago?" asked Isobel.

"Ever so many years, it seems to me," Beryl replied very quietly.

"Was your father a musician?" Isobel went on.

"No," answered Beryl. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I only wondered. What was his profession, then?"

Beryl gazed at her in silence, and Isobel thought perhaps she did not understand.

"His work, I mean. What did he do for a living? Or had he independent means?"

"He—I don't know what he did—he went to the City every day," Beryl ended lamely; her face was ghastly white. "It's so long ago—I can't remember—I was only very young when he died."

This seemed to satisfy Isobel for a time, and she began talking of her brother Gerald and his taste in hosiery, until presently she began to inquire about the aunt with whom Beryl said she lived at Enfield. But on this subject Beryl was decidedly reticent, and answered vaguely, and as often as possible in monosyllables, so that Isobel could gain little or nothing from her questionings. All she gleaned was that Beryl's 'Aunt Laura' lived at Enfield, and that she was a widow, with one daughter about eighteen years old, whose name was also 'Laura.'

Presently the conversation veered round to schools again, and Isobel asked, "By the way, what was the name of your school at Enfield?"

Beryl hesitated but a moment, then said, "Rotherington House School."

"Why, I believe that's the very school a friend of mine went to at Enfield—that's why I asked you the name. How quaint! I must write and tell her—that is, when we are allowed by these silly old rules to write to anyone. She'll be frightfully interested to know I know some one who went to the same school with her. But I expect you know her; her name is Brent—Kathleen Brent."

Beryl shook her head. "I don't recall the name," she said. "But what were you saying at dinner about some one living at the Manor House named Lady Prior—who is a relation of yours?" asked Beryl all at once, desperately anxious to change the subject. Her ruse was immediately successful. Isobel plunged into the trap headlong, leaving behind her, for the moment, her curiosity concerning Beryl.

"Of course, I don't know for certain that they are relations, but I know Pater has a cousin or second cousin named Henry who was knighted some years ago—but it is a branch of the family that we've somehow lost touch with—they've lived abroad a lot. But I *must* find out if these *are* the same Priors! It's strange! I've never heard Pater mention that they had a country seat down here—but, as I said, we lost sight of them, and besides, they may have only returned to England recently. I must make inquiries and find out all I can—then, of course, if I find they *are* my relations—" Isobel chattered on, but Beryl was scarcely conscious of what she was saying.

Beryl's mind was obsessed by the awkward questions she had just evaded—the questions about her father, her aunt, and her school. Only about the last

subject had she been forced into telling a direct untruth, she told herself, trying to remember what she *had* said to Isobel about all three subjects; and it was only the name of the school that had been—incorrect. But it was in vain that Beryl tried to ease her mind. She knew she had never been inside Rotherington House School in her life; it was the best school in Enfield for the ‘Daughters of Gentlemen,’ and Beryl knew it well by sight and had made use of its name in a weak moment. Beryl sat on the piano-stool, apparently listening to Isobel, but raging inwardly—hating herself for telling a lie, and hating Isobel for driving her into a corner and making her say what she had. She felt perfectly miserable.

Isobel’s flow of conversation was suddenly checked by the entrance of Caroline.

”I thought I heard some one in here,” said Caroline slowly.

”Hullo! Have you finished unpacking yet?” asked Isobel, in a laughing, sarcastic way.

”Yes, I’ve practically finished,” replied Caroline composedly, seating herself in a chair by the fire, and bringing some needlework out of a bag she carried on her arm.

”Oh, you industrious creature! What *are* you going to do now?” exclaimed Isobel despairingly.

”I’m just working my initials on some new handkerchiefs,” said Caroline solemnly.

There was no mystery about Caroline, and consequently no incentive to Isobel’s curiosity. She had already found out, while they were waiting for dinner, where Caroline had been to school, what her father’s occupation was, where she lived, and who made her clothes; and everything was plain and satisfactory and stolid, and if not exactly aristocratic, at any rate eminently respectable—like Caroline herself.

Isobel’s glance wandered from Caroline, with her smooth plait of hair, and her long-sleeved, tidy, unbecoming blouse, to Beryl, with her pale, sensitive face, and white silk blouse with the elbow sleeves that made her arms look thin and cold this chilly January day. Why didn’t she wear a more suitable blouse, Isobel wondered—and looked down at her own sensible dark blue *crêpe de Chine* shirt blouse with a sigh of satisfaction.

”What became of those papers Pamela and I bought this morning?” Isobel yawned. ”I quite forgot—I was going to look in the local rag to see what was going on in this place—and to see if there is any information about dancing classes—”

”I think the papers were left in the dining-room,” said Beryl. ”I’ll get them for you.” And she was out of the room before Isobel could say another word. She felt that if she had sat still on the piano-stool a minute longer she would have had to do something desperate; pounce on Isobel and shake her, or snatch

the serenely complacent Caroline's needlework out of her hands and tear it in half. People had no right to be so complacent; people had no right to be so horribly inquisitive. Then she shivered at the thought of the scene she might have created—and dashed out of the room for the newspapers.

She was quickly back with the papers, for which Isobel yawned her thanks and then proposed to read out some 'tit-bits' for Caroline's benefit. "For I really do think your mind must want a little recreation, my dear Caroline," she remarked, "after the fatiguing work it has had in deciding whether you shall embroider C.W. upon your handkerchiefs or just plain C."

"I am embroidering C.A.W. upon all of them," said Caroline seriously, and not in the least offended, stopping to look over the top of her round spectacles for a moment at the crown of Isobel's fluffy head bending over the newspaper.

At the first opportunity to slip away unobserved Beryl made her way up to her bedroom. As soon as she was inside she locked the door, and throwing herself on the bed she began to cry, her face buried in the pillow to stifle the sound of her sobs.

CHAPTER VIII

WHICH CONCERNS A VISIT TO INCHMOOR AND A WOMAN WITH A LIMP

The following day was dry, with a hint of sunshine in the air, which tempted the four girls to plan a four-mile walk over the hills to Inchmoor, the nearest market town. They each wanted to do some shopping, and Isobel wanted to make inquiries about a 'Dancing Academy' advertised in the local paper.

So, with great enthusiasm, the girls set about their morning tasks before they started out—each making her own bed and tidying her room.

Old Martha shook her head and smiled as she crossed the landing, duster in hand.

"Too good to last," she thought to herself.

True, the enthusiasm did not last longer than a week, but the girls stuck to their plan nevertheless, and whether they felt enthusiastic or not they made their beds and tidied their rooms each day without fail; it became, after a time, a matter of habit.

As Martha crossed the landing and was passing Pamela's bedroom door the

door sprang open and Pamela ran out, almost colliding with Martha, whom she grasped by the arm.

"Oh, Martha, I'm so sorry. I didn't hurt you, did I?" she cried. "But you're the very person I wanted. Do come and look out of my window for a second, and tell me who this is!"

She hurried old Martha across to the window, and pointed out to her a woman dressed in grey, who was walking briskly away along the green.

"I can't see very well without my glasses," said Martha, peering intently through the window, while Pamela added a few words of description of the woman in grey to help Martha to recognize her. "Oh—*that* young person," Martha exclaimed suddenly; "well, she isn't exactly what you might call young—but still—That's Elizabeth Bagg, Miss Pamela. Old Tom Bagg's sister."

"Tom Bagg?" queried Pamela, who had not heard the name yet.

"The old cabman what brought your luggage up here the other night, Miss Pamela."

"Oh! That is whom she reminds me of then," Pamela said. "I knew I'd seen some one like her recently, but do you know, I couldn't think for the life of me who it was. But tell me—is she an artist? I saw her carrying an easel—and she dresses very artistically."

"Yes, she do go in for painting a bit, Miss Pamela," said Martha. "But, poor creature, she don't get much time to herself. She keeps house for her brother—and him a widderer with six little children—so you may depend she's got her hands full. How she manages to keep the children and everything so nice, and yet get her painting done and all, is more'n I can understand. She gives lessons over at a young ladies' school at Inchmoor too—twice a week."

"I'd like to get to know her, and see some of her pictures," said Pamela, watching the figure in grey as it disappeared in the distance.

"She's rather difficult to get to know—keeps herself *to* herself, if you know what I mean, Miss Pamela," said Martha.

"I know," Pamela replied. "But people who paint always interest me so much—"

"I daresay she'd be glad of some one to take an interest in her work—it isn't much encouragement she gets from her brother, I know—not that she ever says anything about it; he seems to expect her to be always cooking and baking and sewing and cleaning for him and the children—and he don't set any value on her pictures at all. Yet what *is* nicer, I always say, than a nice picture to hang on the walls! It makes a place look furnished at once, don't it?"

Pamela nodded. "Where does she live?" she inquired.

"You know the blacksmith's place, Miss Pamela?—well, half-way up that lane that runs beside the blacksmith's—a little house on the right-hand side as

you go up is Tom Bagg's, called 'Alice Maud Villa'—out of compliment to old Tom's aunt what they thought was going to leave them some money—but she didn't."

"Alice Maud Villa," mused Pamela. "I thought perhaps she lived at that little white cottage opposite, as I saw her go in there."

"Oh, no, she don't live there," said Martha. "She was probably only leaving some new-laid eggs or a plaster for Mrs Gresham's rheumatics—she do have rheumatics something chronic, poor dear. That's what it was, most likely, Miss Pamela. Elizabeth Bagg is a very kind-hearted creature."

"I shall do my best to get to know her," said Pamela.

Half an hour later—after a slight delay caused by Caroline being unable to make up her mind whether she should take her mackintosh as well as her goloshes and umbrella, and finally deciding to take it in spite of Isobel's unconcealed mirth—the four girls started off on their walk to Inchmoor. Beryl and Caroline were introduced to the village by the other two girls, before they all turned up the lane that led through the fields, and over the hill, to the market town.

This was the lane that led past the picturesque old windmill that Millicent Jackson had told Pamela about in the paper-shop; and knowing this, Pamela had brought a notebook and pencil with her in case she felt tempted to stop and make a sketch of it while the others went on to Inchmoor. There was nothing she wanted to get particularly at the shops in the little town, and a fine day in January was a thing to seize for sketching—there were so few fine days; and one could always do shopping in the rain.

The lane that ran between the fields was very pretty even in January, and Pamela found herself wishing that her brother Michael was with her; he always appreciated the same scenery as she did, and her thoughts were with him and those at home while she joined in, more or less at random, the animated conversation that was going on around her. She dared not let herself think too much about her home, or such a wave of homesickness would have engulfed her that she would have wanted to go straight off to the station and take a through ticket to Oldminster at once. She felt she could not possibly endure six whole months without a sight of her mother or any of them.

"But I've got to see this thing through now," she told herself. "I mustn't be silly. And six months will pass quickly if I've got plenty to do."

Pamela had thought over her duties as hostess carefully, and was convinced that it was necessary to have some kind of work for each of them to do, day by day, if they were not to become bored or irritable with each other, and if their six months' stay in Barrowfield was to be a success. Of course, it was too early to be bored with anything yet—everything was so fresh; but presently, when they

had got used to each other and Barrowfield, she feared things might not run so easily—unless there was plenty of interesting work to be done. Cut off from their home interests, they were left with many blank spaces in their lives which needed filling—and Pamela meant to see that these spaces were filled; she was a great believer in keeping busy.

Enthusiasm is generally catching. And Pamela's enthusiasm had been communicated to the other three—which explains Isobel's desire to interview the principal of the Dancing Academy; and Caroline's determination to inquire about dress-making lessons in Inchmoor, though unfortunately she had not been able to find anything about the matter in the local paper. Beryl was in quest of some musical studies which she meant to buy out of her three pounds. But enthusiasm can keep at white heat with but few people; and those who are naturally enthusiastic must keep the others going—as Pamela was to find out.

The four girls soon began to ascend a steep incline in the lane, with tall hedges bordering each side now, and separating them from the fields. Whenever they came to a gate set in a gap between the hedges, and leading into one or other of the fields, they would stop for a moment and look over the bars of the gate at the fine view of hills and woods that unfolded itself before them. They were certainly in the midst of charming country; even Isobel admitted this involuntarily, and she rarely if ever expressed any appreciation of scenery.

At length, as they turned a bend in the lane, the old windmill came in sight.

"What a fine picture it makes!" thought Pamela; then she exclaimed aloud, "Oh, and there's a pond beside it—Millicent Jackson never mentioned the pond. It's just exactly what it wants to complete the picture."

So attracted was Pamela by the windmill, which proved on nearer inspection to be even more picturesque than it had appeared from a distance, that she arranged at once to stay behind and make a sketch of it while the other three went on to Inchmoor.

"And if I've finished before you return I'll come on to the town and meet you. But if you don't see me wandering round Inchmoor, look for me here as you come back. You don't mind me staying behind, do you? But I feel just in the mood to try sketching this old place to-day," Pamela said.

The others said that of course they did not mind, and after refreshing each other's memory with the reminder, that five o'clock was the hour they had told Martha they would be home for 'high tea,' they left Pamela beside the old mill on the hill-top and started to wend their way down the lane on the other side, toward the distant spires of Inchmoor, two miles away.

"Do you know, I've been thinking quite a lot about that locked-up room next to mine," said Isobel to the other two, as they went along. "Oh, yes, I know Pamela thinks it wiser not to talk too much about it for fear of adding 'fuel to

the flames' of curiosity! But one can't help thinking about it! It's so frightfully strange. Now what do you think—in your own mind, Caroline—what do you think *is* inside that room?"

"Well," replied Caroline slowly, "I shouldn't be surprised if Miss Crabingway kept all her private papers and possessions that she treasures, and does not want us to use or spoil, locked up inside the room. I know that's what I'd have done if I'd been Miss Crabingway."

"You think it's only *things* then?" Beryl broke in. "Not—not a person?"

"What do you mean?" cried Isobel instantly, turning to Beryl with great interest.

Seeing that the other two were waiting eagerly for her reply, Beryl felt a momentary thrill of importance, and let her imagination run away with her.

"I mean," she said nervously, "supposing there was a secret entrance leading into that room—so that a person could get in and out without us knowing anything about it. And supposing some one occasionally crept into the room and—and spied on us through the keyhole—just to see what we were doing."

"Oh, Beryl, what an idea!" gasped Isobel in delight. "Whatever made you think of that?"

"I don't know—it—it just came into my head," stammered Beryl.

"I don't think it's at all a likely idea," Caroline deliberated. "Surely one of us would have heard some little sound coming from the room if there had been anyone inside there! I haven't heard anything myself. Besides, who would want to spy on us?"

"There's only one person, of course—and that's Miss Crabingway," said Beryl.

Caroline's eyes grew wide and round with surprise; but Isobel narrowed hers, and looked at Beryl through the fringe of her eyelashes.

"You don't mean to say," Isobel said incredulously, "that Miss Crabingway would spend her time ... well, I never! What an idea!"

"But Miss Crabingway's in Scotland, isn't she?" asked Caroline in mild astonishment. She had been told that Miss Crabingway had gone to Scotland and had never questioned the matter—of course having no reason to do so.

"Well—so we're told," said Isobel; then she gave an exaggerated shiver. "Ugh! I don't like the idea of an eye watching me through the keyhole!"

"We might ask Martha to hang a curtain in front of the door—say we feel a draught coming through on to the landing," suggested Beryl. "But really, please don't take this seriously—I only made it all up—in fun, you know—it isn't a bit possible. I—p'r'aps we ought not to have talked about it. Pamela said 'fuel for the flames.' ... And it does make you more curious when you discuss it, doesn't it?"

"I don't know," said Isobel. "I certainly shan't be tempted to look through the keyhole myself—in *case* there's anything in your idea, and Miss Crabingway sees me, and I lose my fifty pounds. But I shall *listen*, and if I hear any sounds coming from the room—"

Isobel was evidently rather taken with Beryl's suggestion, for she referred to it more than once before they reached Inchmoor.

When they at last arrived in the busy little market town they decided that it would probably be quicker for each of them to go about her own affairs, and then all to meet in an hour's time at a certain tea-shop in the High Street, where they would have some hot chocolate and sandwiches to keep them going until they got home again.

"P'r'aps Pamela will have joined us by then," said Beryl hopefully.

Inchmoor was a bustling, cheerful little place, with very broad streets, plenty of shops, a town hall, and a picture palace.

Beryl quickly discovered a music shop, and here she spent an enjoyable half-hour turning over a pile of new and second-hand music, and picking out several pieces that she had long wanted to buy. When she at length tore herself reluctantly away from the music-seller's, it occurred to her that perhaps she might buy a new and warmer blouse if she could see one in a draper's window; but she was not used to buying clothes for herself and rather dreaded the ordeal of entering a big drapery establishment when she was not sure what kind of material she preferred, nor how much she ought to pay for it. She passed and re-passed one draper's shop, but catching sight of the Wellington-nosed shop-walker, and a fashionably dressed lady assistant, eyeing her through the glass door, her courage failed her and she passed on down the street to another draper's. Here the exasperated tones of a girl serving at the blouse counter came to Beryl's ears, and she hesitated, lingered for a few moments looking in the window, and then decided not to bother about a blouse to-day—there was not much time left before she would have to meet the others at the tea-shop. She looked about for a clock, and spying one, found that there was no time left at all, and, inwardly relieved, she walked briskly away down the street.

In the meantime Isobel had found Madame Clarence's Dancing Academy, and was now occupied in interviewing no less a personage than Madame Clarence herself.

The Academy was in a side-street, and was a tall, flat-fronted old house with a basement and an area; it did not look as if it belonged to Inchmoor at all, being quite unlike the other houses in its neighbourhood, which were frankly cottages, or really old-fashioned country residences. The Academy was an alien; it looked so obviously the sort of house that is seen in dozens on the outskirts of London. It gave one the feeling that at some time or other it really must have

been a town house, and that one night it must have stolen away from the London streets and come down here for a breath of the fresh country air. And once having reached Inchmoor it had stayed on, lengthening its holiday indefinitely, until every one had forgotten that it was only to have been a holiday, and had accepted the Academy as a permanent resident.

Madame Clarence, who received Isobel in a drawing-room which seemed to be mostly blue plush, long lace curtains, and ferns, was a small, bright-eyed woman, dressed in a black and white striped dress. Madame walked in a springy, dancing manner, and when she was not talking she was humming softly to herself. She wore a number of rings on her short white fingers—fingers which were never for a moment still, but were either playing an imaginary piano on Madame's knee, drumming on the table, toying with the large yellow beads round Madame's neck, or doing appropriate actions to illustrate the words Madame said. Madame had grey hair, though her skin was soft and unwrinkled, except for a certain bagginess under the eyes.

To all appearances Madame must have been inside the house when it came down from London, for she gave an impression of being town-bred, and, judging by her conversation, of having conferred a favour on Inchmoor by consenting to reside in so unimportant a spot. She said she would be charmed to have Miss Prior as a pupil, and ran over, for Isobel's benefit, a long list of names of Society people to whom she claimed to have given dancing lessons. Isobel was duly impressed and inquired her fees. After ascertaining what kind of dancing Isobel wished to be instructed in, Madame said the fee would be three guineas a term; and as Miss Prior had come when the term was already well advanced, Madame said she would give her extra private lessons until she caught up with the rest of the class. This seemed so generous of Madame that Isobel closed with the offer at once, although the appearance of the Academy was not quite what she had expected; but still, Isobel reminded herself, Inchmoor was only a little country town, and it was a marvellous and fortunate thing to find anyone so exclusive as Madame in such a backwater. And Isobel wondered how the little dancing-mistress had drifted here.

Isobel's thoughts were interrupted by Madame rising and offering personally to conduct her over the dancing-hall, which she proceeded to do, humming as she led the way into a large room with polished floor, seats round the walls, and a baby-grand piano; around the piano were clustered bamboo fern-stands and pedestals, which supported large ferns growing in pots.

"This floor is a perfect dweam to dance on," Madame informed Isobel. "I'm sure you will enjoy it."

After exchanging one or two polite and complimentary remarks with Madame, and having arranged to come over to the Academy every Tuesday

morning and every Friday afternoon, Isobel was about to depart when Madame said:

"It is a long way for you to come from Bawwowfield alone—have you not a friend who would care to come with you and take lessons also?"

Isobel had not thought of this before, but told Madame Clarence she would see if she could arrange for a friend to come with her, admitting that she would certainly prefer it to coming alone.

On her way to the tea-shop she turned the idea over in her mind, and speculated on the likelihood of one of the other girls joining her. She had not much hope of Pamela (whom she would have preferred), because she did not seem to be interested in dancing and wanted all her spare time for her sketching and reading. Beryl was a doubtful person—no, Isobel thought it unlikely that Beryl would join. Caroline—Isobel smiled to herself at the idea of slow, clumsy Caroline dancing. "It would do her a world of good though," she thought to herself. "And, anyway, though I'm not frightfully keen on her company, she'd be better than no one." She would put the matter to all three, Isobel decided, and see if any of them seemed inclined to join her.

She found Caroline and Beryl waiting at the tea-shop for her, and the three of them went in and ordered hot chocolate and sandwiches. They chose a table near the window so that they were able to watch all that went on in the street outside.

Caroline was rather sulky over the meal because she had failed to find out anything at all about dressmaking classes in Inchmoor, and was consequently disappointed. Such classes did not seem to exist, and she had spent her hour in fruitless inquiries, and in trying to get a certain kind of embroidery silk to match some that she already had. The silk had been unobtainable also, and Caroline's time had been wasted on disappointing quests. This was not the time to talk about dancing; Isobel had the wisdom to know this, but nevertheless she was dying to talk about it. She forbore, however, in her own future interests.

"I suppose nobody's seen Pamela yet?" Isobel observed. "We shall find her still sketching those few old bricks, I expect—unless she's found it too cold to sit still! And my goodness! won't she be hungry by this time!"

"Could we take a couple of sandwiches along with us, do you think?" suggested Beryl. "In case she would like to have them."

"Not a bad idea," said Isobel.

So that is what they did. The short January day was already well advanced, and a chilly little breeze had sprung up by the time they emerged from the tea-shop. Isobel and Caroline fastened their furs snugly round their throats, and Beryl buttoned up her coat collar. Then the three girls started briskly off toward Barrowfield.

Meanwhile, Pamela, when the other three left her, had first of all explored the mill and then settled down to her work. That the mill was partly ruined and wholly deserted made matters perfect, according to Pamela's ideas. She wandered up to the open doorway and looked inside. Bricks and dust and broken timber within—nothing else. It was quite light inside, owing to the many holes in the walls. Pamela stepped cautiously in, picking her way through the dust and dried leaves that had drifted in, and over the loose bricks and wooden laths, and clambering on to a small mound of accumulated dust and rubbish she looked through one of the holes in the wall at the magnificent sweep of country stretching away downhill to the little cup in the hill-side where Barrowfield lay. She could see the smoke rising up from the houses in the village; and beyond this, on the farthest side of the cup, a range of tree-clad hills closed the view. Barrowfield was not in a valley, but in a little hollow among the hills.

On the other hand, Inchmoor, which could be located from a hole in the other side of the windmill, was certainly down in a valley; the road leading to the market town was only visible for a short distance beyond the mill; it twisted and curved and then dived out of sight—to become visible again far in the distance when about to enter Inchmoor. Pamela, gazing from the hill-top, could not see anything of the three girls on their way to Inchmoor, as they were already hidden from her sight by a bend in the road.

But when she went back to her former position and took a final look over Barrowfield way before starting work, her eye caught sight of a figure coming rapidly up the hill, along the lane which the girls had just traversed. Being the only living thing in sight at the moment, Pamela watched the figure until it was hidden from her sight for a few minutes by the tall hedges that grew at the sides of the lane. She was not particularly interested in the figure, but had noticed casually that it was a woman, and that the woman appeared to have a slight limp. When she lost sight of her Pamela came out of the old windmill, and taking up the position she had chosen for making her sketch, she got everything ready and set to, and was soon absorbed in her work.

How long she had been sketching before she became aware that some one was standing watching her Pamela did not know. It was probably a considerable time, but she was so engrossed in what she was doing that she had not heard footsteps passing in the lane behind her—footsteps that ceased suddenly, while a woman dressed all in black and wearing a black hat with a heavy veil over her face, and a thick silk muffler wound round her neck and shoulders, stopped and stood gazing with a strange and curiously vindictive look at the unconscious Pamela.

Suddenly, without any other reason except that queer, sub-conscious feeling that one is being watched, Pamela shivered and looked quickly round over

her shoulder—and saw the woman in the lane.

As soon as Pamela stirred the woman turned her head away and moved on, hastily limping forward up the hill.

Pamela, in accordance with the usual country custom, called out in a friendly tone, "Good-day."

The woman made no reply, but continued her limping walk, and was quickly out of sight.

"I suppose she didn't hear. P'r'aps she's deaf," said Pamela to herself, and thought no more about it.

Could she have seen the expression on the woman's face as she stood in the lane a few minutes earlier, watching, Pamela would not have resumed her work with a mind as free from curiosity as she did.

CHAPTER IX

ISOBEL MAKES TROUBLE

Pamela had just finished her sketch, and had begun to be aware that a chilly breeze was blowing down her neck, and that her hands were cold, when the sound of voices came floating toward her; she suddenly realized that it must have been a long time ago when the other girls had left her. And then she heard Isobel's voice exclaiming:

"Why, she's still here! Good gracious, Pamela, you don't mean to say you're still drawing those old bits of wood and bricks! ... Well!" The voice ended on a note of despair that was meant to signify Isobel's conviction that Pamela was qualifying for an asylum. "You must be frightfully hungry," Isobel continued, as the three girls came up to Pamela.

Then it was that Pamela woke up to the fact that she was hungry—very hungry, and very glad of the sandwiches which Beryl now produced and handed over to her.

"I say, that was thoughtful of you. Thanks so much," she smiled at Beryl.

"Did you finish your sketch? May I see it?" asked Beryl shyly.

Pamela brought the drawing out. "But I'm not a bit satisfied with it," she said.

"Oh, I think it's splendid," said Beryl, gazing admiringly at Pamela's picture of the old windmill and the pond.

It was certainly well done; Pamela's style was uncommon, and her treatment of the subject bold and decided. She had talent, undoubtedly, but how far this talent would take her, time alone would show. Pamela was very ambitious, but very critical of her own work, and though full of enthusiasm over a picture while at work upon it, was rarely satisfied with it when finished, which was a very good thing, as it always spurred her on to try to do better. However, Beryl, who was no judge of pictures, thought Pamela's sketch was perfect.

Not until they reached home and were sitting round the fire after 'high tea' did Isobel remember that she had meant to buy a camera in Inchmoor.

"I must get it when I go over to Madame Clarence's for my first lesson," she said. "It will be amusing to keep a photographic record of my visit here."

She had told them all about Madame during the walk home, and now tried to persuade one of them to join her in having dancing-lessons. Nothing definite was settled that night, and Isobel left them to think the matter over.

The following day the girls made an attempt to start on their programme of work. Caroline put in a couple of hours sewing. Beryl practised and copied out some music. And Pamela got out her sketch-book. But what was poor Isobel to do without a Madame Clarence, or a camera at hand? She wandered round the garden for a time, and then she went indoors and talked to Caroline; but finding this too dull, she roamed round the house—keeping a safe distance from the locked door—and went in and out of various rooms, and stood looking out of windows and yawning, until she was almost bored to tears. It was curious, she thought to herself, that the very sight of other people working made her restless and disinclined to settle down to read or write or sew or do anything at all.

Unfortunately this seemed to be the case throughout her stay at Chequertrees; she never wanted to work when other people were working, and consequently there were frequent interruptions from her. Pamela found that the only time she could work indoors undisturbed was when Isobel was over in Inchmoor at her dancing-lessons. Isobel was one of those unhappy people who cannot entertain themselves, but who always want somebody else to be entertaining them.

On this first occasion, when the other three were working and Isobel yawning, Pamela bore it as long as she could, then, packing her sketching materials away with a sigh of regret, she invited Isobel to come out and do a bit of gardening with her. Isobel hated gardening, but it meant some one to talk to, and so she jumped at the idea eagerly. Pamela was not over-fond of gardening, she knew very little about it, but anything was better than hearing Isobel's restless feet wandering about and listening to her audible sighs and yawns.

Out of doors it was rather cold, so they wrapped up warmly, and set to work to 'tidy up a bit' in the garden at the back of the house.

For a while all went well and Isobel chatted away to her heart's content,

while Pamela tied up some withered-looking plants (whose name she did not know) with a length of twine she had found in the kitchen. Martha was upstairs getting dressed for the afternoon when the two girls started on their new occupation, and Ellen was out shopping in the village, otherwise Pamela and Isobel might have been warned about old Silas Sluff. As it was, they continued their gardening, blissfully unconscious that old Silas was just round the corner of the gravel path, behind the privet hedge that separated the vegetable garden from the lawn and flowers.

"I think," said Pamela, "this old bush ought to be trimmed a bit—I wonder if there's a pair of shears handy.... Is this the right time of year to cut it though? ... What do you think?"

"Oh, I expect so," said Isobel at random, knowing nothing about it. "Any time would be all right with those sturdy old bushes—I don't know where the shears are, but here's a pair of old scissors I brought out from the kitchen—they'd do, wouldn't they? Here, let me do a bit of trimming. And, do you know, mater had promised me and Gerald that in any case we should..." She continued a lengthy story that she had started to recount for Pamela's benefit.

And then old Silas came round the privet hedge to fetch his wheelbarrow. He came to an abrupt standstill when he caught sight of the two girls, and stared, open-mouthed, his hat pushed back on his head and his watery blue eyes wide with astonishment. He had had no idea that there was anyone in the garden; he had not heard any talking, as he was afflicted with deafness.

"Ere!" was all he said, when he recovered from his surprise.

Pamela and Isobel started, and turned round at once.

They beheld a very wrinkled little old man, with a ruddy complexion and a tuft of white beard under his chin; he wore a green baize apron, to protect his clothes from the soil, and had a vivid pink shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbow. As the girls returned his gaze steadily, they saw his face begin to work and twitch with indignation.

"Ere!" he said again.

"I beg your pardon," said Pamela.

"What do you want, my good man?" inquired Isobel, haughtily.

"Ere! Wot yer doin' to that there bush? You leave it be, my gels!" called Silas.

Isobel's eyebrows were raised in indignant surprise.

"Why—we're only doing a little gardening! What is it? Who are you?" asked Pamela, unaware that old Silas was deaf.

"Ere's me—done this gardin—man and boy—for forty year—and I don't 'ave no interference," cried Silas.

"Oh, I suppose you are Miss Crabingway's gardener?" said Pamela.

"Leave it be, my gels," was all Silas replied. "If you'd *arxed* me I'd a-given you summat to do—but not that bush—you oughter arxed me first."

"How dare you speak to us like that—" began Isobel, angrily.

But Pamela interrupted with, "It's no good, Isobel, I think he's deaf. He doesn't seem to hear anything we say."

"I don't care whether he's deaf or not deaf—I won't be spoken to like that by a servant. Such impertinence!" cried Isobel.

Silas meanwhile had continued talking without a pause, while he advanced slowly down the path toward them.

Pamela moved forward to meet him, and raising her voice tried to make him understand what they were doing and who they were.

"I'm sorry if you think we've done any harm to the garden—but I don't think we have, you know," she cried. "And we didn't know Miss Crabingway had a gardener."

Silas caught the last sentence. This indeed was adding insult to injury, though Pamela had not meant to be in the least insulting.

"Didn't—know—Miss—Crabingway—had a gardener," repeated Silas, amazed. "Why—I done this gardin—man and boy—forty year, I 'ave. Don't it *look* like it?" he demanded.

"Yes, it does—of course it does," answered Pamela, trying to appease him.

"Well then—" he began, then caught sight of Isobel treading on the side of the garden bed. "'Ere! Get orf that, my gel," he cried. "You're crushin' them li'l plants."

This was too much for Isobel. The gruff, disrespectful tones, the ordering manner, and the 'my gel,' made her suddenly enraged, and her temper got beyond her control.

"How—how dare you!" she flared up. "This is no more your garden than it is—than it is mine, and *I won't* be spoken to like this!"

As her words seemed to be making no impression on Silas, she deliberately stamped on the little plants; then, her temper being properly roused, she turned and snatching at a branch of the bush behind her she twisted and bent it and snapped it off, and flung it on to the pathway.

"There!" she panted. "Now perhaps you will understand that *I will not* tolerate your insolent manner."

With her head high in the air, and her cheeks burning, she walked haughtily away into the house.

Old Silas was dumbfounded.

"Oh, how silly!" cried Pamela, ashamed for Isobel. "I'm so sorry she did that."

Old Silas's watery blue eyes were still more watery as he stooped down

and tried with gentle hands to remedy the mischief that Isobel had done to the little plants. Pamela knelt down on the path to help him, and was bending over the garden bed when all at once she heard the old gardener give a chuckle. She glanced round in surprise. Silas was wagging his head from side to side and chuckling to himself. The plants were not very much damaged, and the bush—well, it would grow again. But it was not these discoveries that filled old Silas's soul with glee.

"Who'd a thought it!" he chuckled. "There's a high sperrit for yer! 'Oighty-toighty is it, my gel? Ho! Hall right! We shall see. Ole Silas Sluff'll learn yer to darnse on 'is gardin. You wait!"

He took no more notice of Pamela, but seemed absorbed in his own thoughts, and when Pamela left him and went indoors he was still giving occasional chuckles and muttering to himself.

"What made you do it?" Pamela said to Isobel afterward. "It didn't do any good—"

"But the man was preposterous!" said Isobel.

"I know he spoke gruffly, but I don't think he meant to be rude," said Pamela. "It's just his manner."

"Then it's time he learnt better," Isobel replied. "I don't know what the world's coming to, I'm sure, with all these inferior creatures setting up to teach—"

"If you count Silas Sluff your inferior, you should be sorry for him and set to work to show him how to behave, instead of—"

"If he were my gardener I'd dismiss him on the spot," Isobel said.

Pamela realized the uselessness of continuing the discussion any further at present, and so the subject was dropped for the time being.

"I ought to have warned you, Miss Isobel," said Martha, when she heard the story. "Old Silas is that touchy-like—but no one takes no notice of what he says. He's worked about these parts for years as a jobbing gardener. But no one takes no notice of him. At present he comes and works two days a week for Miss Crabingway, and the other four days he gives a extra hand up at the Manor House. He lodges down in the village—next door but three to the blacksmith—nice little house—overlooks the stables of the 'Blue Boar' from the back windows."

But when Martha recounted the incident to Ellen, over supper that night, Ellen remembered previous occasions when Silas had been put out with people, and, thinking of his subsequent revenges, her only comment on the story was, "Oo-er!"

The first dinner of Pamela's choosing was voted a great success by Isobel and Beryl. Caroline, who always liked to be as accurate as possible in her remarks, said she would have liked the pudding to have been a little more 'sub-

stantial'; chocolate *soufflé* was very tasty, but there was no inside to it. Caroline had a strong preference for solid puddings—as the other three were to learn when Caroline's turn for arranging meals came round. Meal-times had been fixed so as to give everybody at Chequertrees as much freedom as possible. Breakfast was at 8 a.m. and dinner was at 6.30 p.m., and between those hours there was sometimes lunch at 12.30—and sometimes there was not. If the girls were going out for the day they would get lunch out, or take some sandwiches with them. A tea-tray, daintily set for four, with milk, sugar, tea-pot, spirit kettle, and a plate of cakes, was always to be found in the drawing-room in the afternoons, so that the girls could make a cup of tea when they fancied it; and Martha and Ellen were thus left free in the afternoons. This had been one of Pamela's ideas, and had astonished Martha, who had protested that it was no trouble for her to get them a cup of tea; but Pamela had insisted, and when Martha got used to the arrangement she appreciated it very much. It was good to know that the whole afternoon was her own, and that she would not be disturbed. A glass of hot milk just before bedtime was the last meal of the day.

By the end of January the four girls had settled down fairly comfortably in their new surroundings. Isobel had had her first dancing-lessons at the Academy, which she enjoyed immensely, although she had not been able to persuade one of the other girls to join her yet. Pamela had started an ambitious piece of work—a picture of Chequertrees, as seen from the front garden—which she meant to work on from time to time whenever the weather did not tempt her to go farther afield than the garden; she wanted to take a picture of Chequertrees home with her, so that Mother and Michael could see what the house was like—the house where she had spent six months away from them. Beryl had kept up her practice each day, and spent a good deal of time studying books on theory, composition, and the biographies of great musicians. And Caroline had finished her handkerchiefs and had started on a linen brush and comb bag.

One evening after dinner the four girls were in the drawing-room, Pamela deeply engrossed in a historical story, Beryl copying some music into a manuscript music-book, Caroline sewing as usual, and Isobel reclining on the couch by the crackling fire and dividing her time between yawning and glancing at the *Barrowfield Observer*; presently she gave an exclamation of surprise, and sat up, rustling the paper.

"Listen to this, girls!" she cried. "The local newsrag informs its readers that Sir Henry and Lady Prior and family return to the Manor House next week, and that Lady Prior wishes it stated that the annual bazaar and garden fête (in aid of the Barrowfield Cottage Hospital) will be held as usual at the end of May, and that those who intend making gifts for the stalls at the bazaar should send in their names to her ladyship's secretary, Miss Daleham, as soon as possible. That's

where I come in!" Isobel continued. "That will be the best way to introduce myself to their notice.... So they'll be coming back to the Manor House next week, will they? Isn't it ripping?"

"I love bazaars," said Caroline, slowly and with relish; she saw in her mind's eye a vista of neatly hemmed handkerchiefs, with initials worked in the corners; plump pin-cushions, dorothea bags, hair-tidies, cushion covers with frills, tea-cosies, all worked by hand. Already she could see these things spread alluringly out on a stall for sale, with neat little tickets stuck on them. "I'll send in my name to make something," she added.

She did not see Isobel frown as she picked up her newspaper again.

"Bazaars," said Pamela over the top of her book, "I don't like bazaars. They are places where you get the least value for the greatest amount of money spent. I'd always rather give my money willingly to any good cause or fund—rather than buy something I didn't want at a price it wasn't worth—just so that I could see something for the money I was giving in this roundabout way to a deserving object."

Caroline gazed at her in astonishment.

"I think bazaars are splendid things for helping charities," she said slowly. "I don't think of them as you do—"

"Oh, what does it matter about the bazaar," broke in Isobel. "What really matters to me is that it's a chance to make the acquaintance of my probable relatives. I wonder if there are any daughters in the family about my age?"

But Caroline, who was not attending to Isobel for the moment, threaded another needle, and went steadily on with her line of argument.

"People buy much more at a bazaar than they would in the usual way," she informed Pamela.

"And they pay much more than they would in the usual way," laughed Pamela.

"And so more money is collected for the charity," urged Caroline.

"I doubt it," said Pamela. "You think of all the time and money spent in the making of the articles for the stalls—and the arrangements and correspondence in connection with the bazaar. Now if the cost of all that were put into one side of the scales, and the amount of money taken at the bazaar put into the other side of the scales, I think I know which side would weigh heavier."

"No," Caroline shook her head; "I don't think you do. Each person who helps gives a little time and money to the making of the things, which are afterward sold all together for a substantial sum. It seems to me a very good way to raise money."

"But it's such a wasteful system," objected Pamela. "If people gave what money they could spare straight to the good cause they wished to benefit, and

then spent their time on doing more useful work than stuffing pin-cushions and writing out tickets for bazaars, I'm sure it would be more practical."

"But people won't do things that way," said Beryl, joining in for the first time. "Though I quite agree with you, Pamela, in disliking bazaars."

"Anyway," said Isobel, impatiently, because she had again lost the reins of the conversation, "although I don't care 'tuppence' about bazaars, one way or the other, I'm going to this one for reasons I've already stated. You see I'm quite honest about it—I only want an excuse for meeting my long-lost, or perhaps I should say new-found, relations."

Pamela, looking across at Isobel, suddenly realized something, and marvelled that it had not occurred to her before; maybe it was because she had not paid much attention to Isobel's chatter about Lady Prior—had not taken it seriously; but now that she heard the Priors were returning, and that Isobel was going to take the first opportunity of meeting them, she cried impulsively,

"Why, Isobel, you *can't!* Don't you remember that we all had to promise Miss Crabingway not to visit or invite to this house 'any relations whatsoever!'"

A look of dismay flashed across Isobel's face.

"Oh," her voice dropped in quick disappointment; but the next moment she recovered. "But perhaps they're not my relatives after all," she said, hardly knowing whether she wished they were or were not. "Oh, bother those silly old restrictions!" she cried irritably. "But what can I do? How can I find out if they are my relatives or not unless I meet them?"

Pamela thought awhile. "Well—appoint a deputy—some one to go and find out for you," she suggested, half sorry for Isobel on account of her obvious disappointment, and half amused at her keenness to claim relationship with these titled folk of the neighbourhood. Pamela felt sure that Isobel would not dream of trying to claim kinship with the village bootmaker, or grocer, if his name happened to be Prior.

But Pamela's suggestion did not suit Isobel at all; half the excitement would be lost if some one else had all the introductory moves to do. "Oh, I don't think Miss Crabingway's silly old rule could possibly apply to Lady Prior," said Isobel.

"Why not?" asked Pamela.

"Well—you see—it's different somehow—you see they are strangers to me at present, even if they *are* my relatives. And I can't see how it would matter if I get to know them. Miss Crabingway must mean relatives one already knows."

"Not necessarily, I'm afraid," said Pamela.

"Well, what shall I do?" asked Isobel, blankly.

"If you are really anxious to settle the matter, I'm afraid a deputy is the only course open to you. Of course, if they are your relations you must simply ignore them; if they're not, you can cultivate their acquaintance or not, just as you like,"

Pamela said, trying her best to be helpful to Isobel, as she could see the problem appeared to be of great moment to her.

"Oh, but I couldn't ignore Lady Prior in any case, could I?" said Isobel.

"You must settle that matter yourself," replied Pamela, quietly. "But I think it would be breaking your word to Miss Crabingway if you visit any relations whatsoever."

Isobel was quiet for a while, thinking the matter over.

"Um! Well, I'll have to see," she said presently, and fell silent again, making plans for the future.

The other three resumed their occupations, and for a while there were no sounds in the room but the rustle of paper, the scratching of a pen, and the little plucking noise of Caroline's needle as it moved in and out of the stiff linen she was sewing.

By and by Beryl got up and went out of the room to fetch another sheet of music from her box upstairs. This interruption caused Isobel to break silence again by making several remarks to Caroline concerning Beryl's attire.

"And why ever she wears such short-sleeved blouses this cold weather, I'm sure I don't know," she ended.

"They don't look like new ones. Perhaps she's had them some time," suggested Caroline.

"Yes. Certainly the style looks a bit out of date," said Isobel, laughing. "I wonder her people didn't get her some new ones when they knew she was coming here, instead of sending her in old-fashioned things like that."

Pamela, deep in her book, became suddenly aware of the turn the conversation had taken, and fearing Beryl might return and overhear (because Isobel was thoughtlessly talking in her usual clear, penetrating voice), she clapped her book to, and jumped up, saying:

"What do you say to a tune—and, oh, I know—a little dance—to tire us out before we go to bed. May I have the pleasure, mam'selle? Get up, Isobel, I want to push the couch out of the way to make more room. Come and show us what you learnt at Madame Clarence's on Friday?"

Isobel, welcoming any diversion for a change, willingly helped to push the furniture out of the way, and very soon she was waltzing round the room to the strains of a haunting melody that Pamela was playing on the piano. Caroline, although she protested that she could not dance, was made to join in by Isobel.

"I'll show you, come on!" Isobel insisted; and to the accompaniment of Pamela's tune and much laughter and joking from Isobel (all of which Caroline took very good-temperedly), Caroline was piloted round the room, moving ponderously and ungracefully in the mazes of a waltz.

"Of course you're not *obliged* to dance on my feet, dear child," groaned

Isobel, laughingly. "It would make a little variety for you if you danced on the carpet just *occasionally*, you know. Take care, you'll knock that chair over! Look out, Pamela, we're coming past you!"

It was to this laughing, animated scene that Beryl returned. Pamela, looking over her shoulder, took a hurried glance at Beryl's face, and was satisfied. "I'm so glad. She didn't overhear Isobel then," she thought. But Pamela was wrong.

However, Beryl, having had time to cool her tell-tale cheeks before she came in, joined in now as if quite unconscious; and when, presently, Ellen appeared with four glasses of hot milk on a tray (followed by Martha, who was curious to see what was going on), Beryl was playing a lively Irish jig on the piano, and Pamela and Isobel were dancing furiously in the middle of the room; while Caroline sat gasping on the couch, fanning herself with the *Barrowfield Observer*, and recovering from the polka Isobel had just been trying to teach her.

"I like to see young things dance and enjoy themselves," observed Martha, as she and Ellen stood in the doorway for a few minutes, watching.

"It's a long time since there was any dancing in this house," said Ellen.

"Yet what's nicer!" replied Martha, beaming into the room.

CHAPTER X

PAMELA BEFRIENDS BERYL AND MEETS ELIZABETH BAGG

On looking back at the first months' happenings at Barrowfield, there were two incidents that always stood out clearly from all the rest in Pamela's mind; they made a deep impression on her at the time, and afterward influenced her actions considerably. The first of these incidents was the confession Beryl made to her; and the second, the beginning of her friendship with Elizabeth Bagg.

Passing Beryl's door on her way to bed one night Pamela caught the sound of sobbing. She stood still, listening; the sounds were faint, but unmistakable. What should she do? She hesitated for a moment, then tapped on the door; then, as no one answered, and the sobbing continued without a break, Pamela turned the handle and went in.

A candle on the dressing-table lighted up the figure of Beryl, still fully dressed, stretched on the bed, her face buried in the pillows.

"Why, Beryl! Beryl! What's the matter? Can I help you, dear?" Pamela

closed the door, and, crossing the room, laid her hand on Beryl's shaking shoulders.

Beryl sprang up as if she had been shot.

"Oh! I didn't hear anybody—Oh! Pamela!" and she burst out crying again—not noisily, but in an intense, quiet way, that frightened Pamela.

"Are you ill, Beryl? Shall I go and fetch Martha?" she asked anxiously.

Beryl shook her head. "No, no," she sobbed. "I—I'll be all right—in a—in a minute. Wait a minute."

Pamela waited patiently, sitting on the edge of the bed, her arm round Beryl's shoulders. "Poor old girl," she said once.

Presently Beryl became calmer, and began to murmur apologetically,

"It's so silly of me. I'm so sorry if I gave you a start—I didn't hear you come in—I thought I'd locked the door—and I couldn't help crying again when I saw you—I was all worked up so. Please forgive me—being so silly—only—only I was so miserable." And here the tears began afresh.

"Don't, Beryl, you'll make yourself ill if you cry like that. I wish I could help you— What is it? Won't you tell me? *Do* trust me, if it's anything I can help you in—I would be so glad to help you. Do tell me what it is," urged Pamela.

For a moment Beryl felt inclined to prevaricate, and say that she was merely overtired, or depressed, and so account for the fit of crying; but the longing to share her troubles with some one—and that some one the most sympathetic person she knew at present—conquered her usual reticence. She feared losing Pamela's respect, and yet she felt as if Pamela would somehow understand her.

"Is it that you're longing to go home?" asked Pamela kindly, quite unprepared for the emphasis with which Beryl replied:

"Oh, *no*."

"I believe I know," said Pamela, remembering one or two occasions recently in which Isobel figured as the cause of discomfiture to Beryl. "Some one has been bothering you about things that don't concern them in the least.... I shouldn't mind about that if I were you."

"You must think it silly of me—I wish I didn't care—and I don't really," Beryl explained in a confused way. "I care much more what you think about me than I do what Isobel thinks about me. It's what *I* do, when she keeps questioning me, that upsets me." Beryl paused, and rubbed her eyes with her handkerchief, then said suddenly, "When she bothers me with questions I—it makes me tell *lies*! ... And, oh, Pamela," she sobbed, "I do *hate* myself for doing it." She went on to explain more fully, pausing every now and again to dab her eyes, or blow her nose, or cry a little bit more; and Pamela, piecing the broken sentences together, began to understand what had been taking place.

"She's always asking me about my school—and I haven't told her the truth

about that," said Beryl. "When father and mother died, and left me in the charge of my aunt, aunt was not able to afford much for me, so she sent me to a *council* school. That's where I was educated! And I haven't the courage to tell Isobel this, because she might despise me, as she seems to despise all people who have been to such schools. I know it's stupid of me, and I despise myself for being afraid to tell her. But having once said I'd been to another sort of school I have to keep on inventing things about it—about a place I've never been to—and I feel so horrid all the time.... And then, she ridicules my clothes—I know she does—and I can't help it—I haven't any others at present; some that I wear are my cousin's left-off ones—I'd never have chosen them myself.... Then she's always asking about my—my father and mother—and the aunt I lived with, after they died.... Aunt Laura keeps a little shop in Enfield, where her daughter—Cousin Laura—helps her to serve behind the counter. And I haven't told Isobel this because she always speaks of 'shop-people' with such contempt.... We lived very roughly at Enfield, and Aunt Laura was always shouting, and I couldn't bear the slovenly way we had meals. Oh, I've hated it all, and hated having it always thrust before my mind by Isobel's questions, and hated myself for deceiving everybody. I've felt all the time as if I've been out of place—pretending to be used to a nicely-kept household, when I'm not.... I've sometimes almost wished that Miss Crabingway had never invited me here—and yet, I love being here.... Oh, I'm sure you'll think I'm ridiculous for making such a fuss about these things, but you can't think what a lot I've *felt* them—and how I've dreaded Isobel finding out."

Beryl paused. "But most of all I've dreaded—" she began, and then stopped, "I've dreaded—" she was having great difficulty in getting her words out now, "I've—dreaded—her knowing—about my father. He—he died—in *prison*." She was not crying now, but gazing with wide, frightened eyes into Pamela's face. "I *must* tell you—I *must* tell you the rest—it wouldn't be fair not to. Wait a minute."

Beryl put her hand inside her blouse and drew out a little key attached to a long black cord; scrambling hurriedly to her feet she went across to a drawer in the dressing-table and brought out a small black box; she unlocked this, and quickly found what she wanted. It was a letter, written in faint, thin writing, which she brought over and placed in Pamela's hands.

"Read it," said Beryl, and stood holding the lighted candle just behind Pamela's shoulder so that she could see to read the following letter:

MY DEAR LITTLE DAUGHTER,

Some day, in the distant future, you may hear cruel things said about your father—things that may not only be cruel, but false as well, and which will cause

you much suffering. The truth is cruel, but I am going to tell you the truth now, so that you will know all there is to know, and will not suffer unnecessarily. I wish for your sake that my life could be spared until you had grown to years of understanding, but this I know cannot be.

As I write this you are playing happily on the rug at my feet—such a little thing you are—my poor little daughter. And you are laughing.... It makes my heart ache to think that when you are old enough to read this letter, and understand, you may be crying—and I shall not be near to comfort you.

But we must face things bravely, my dear.... Your father is dead. He died two months ago in prison. They told me it was pneumonia, but I know that it was because his heart was broken. (People can die of broken hearts, you know, Beryl.) When he died he was serving a term of imprisonment for embezzlement; he stole a large sum of money from his employers—hoping to be able to pay it back before it was missed, he said; but he was not able to do this. Never believe that he was a wicked man, your father; he was tempted—and he could not resist. He had been with the same firm for many years, and large sums of money passed through his hands each month. At home there were debts to pay—I was ill, and you had been ill—and illness uses up so much money; and your father's salary was not over-high, although his position was a responsible one. You can see how it happened—how, when an opportunity occurred when he could easily borrow the money, the temptation was too much for him....

His employers were very hard on him, in spite of his long and honourable years of service with them—and he died in prison.

That is all. And if, in the future, you hear additions to this story, do not believe them, little daughter—they are not true.

Your father was a good man, in my eyes, in spite of everything. Remember, he did it for us—so that you and I might live and get well and strong. For me, it was useless.... I know I am dying now. For you—I am praying for you....

Pamela read the signature of Beryl's mother through a blur of tears. She was not a girl who cried easily, and she bit her underlip in an effort to stop it quivering; but the tears forced their way into her eyes so that she dared not look up at Beryl for a moment. She stared instead at the old letter in her hands—the letter written over fourteen years ago, seeing nothing but the white sheet of paper glimmering through her tears. She did not realize that Beryl was waiting in an agony of suspense for her to speak, until she looked up at length and saw Beryl's face.

"Oh, Beryl," was all she could say. And the next moment she had flung her arms round Beryl, and both girls were crying together.

"You see," said Beryl, after a while, "it isn't that I'm ashamed of my father—

oh, it *isn't* that, but I couldn't ever explain to Isobel—I couldn't talk to her about him at all—she'd be all out of sympathy, and she wouldn't understand a bit.... you understand how I mean, Pamela, don't you? ... I've never shown this letter to anyone but you. It was left to me—locked up in an old box with some other things from my mother, with instructions that I was to open it on my fourteenth birthday.... I can't tell you how I felt when I first read it—it came just at a time when I was needing it badly.... But I wouldn't show it to Isobel for anything—you do understand, Pamela?"

"I think I understand," said Pamela gently. "But, Beryl, dear, about your school, and the other things, you've let the thought of Isobel's opinion gain an unreasonable power over you—and you said just now you didn't really mind what she thought of you?"

"Yes, I know," said Beryl, tearfully. "It's all been so silly, and it seems sillier when it's talked of even than when I only thought about it.... Pamela, do you—do you despise me?"

"Of course I don't," replied Pamela promptly.

"Not for anything?"

"Not for anything, you old silly," said Pamela. "And now, look here, I want us to make a plan together. I was just wondering—what would be the best thing for you to do about Isobel!"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, we've all got to go on living under this roof together for five more months, and you can't go on being worried and miserable and dreading things all that time! Besides, there's no need. We might just as well all be comfortable together."

"What do you think I'd better do?" asked Beryl. "You see, I can't let Isobel know that I've been telling her stories all the time—I can't tell her the truth now. Besides," Beryl's voice was indignant, "what business is it of hers? She shouldn't question me like she does."

"Of course she shouldn't," agreed Pamela. "But I'm sure it's done thoughtlessly. She doesn't understand a bit; if she did, she'd be a deal more kindly. She's not a bad sort really, you know, Beryl. I've met several girls like her—I think it's the fault of her upbringing."

"She can make people feel so *small* sometimes, just by the tone of her voice," said Beryl. "Oh, it's hateful! I—I couldn't bear it."

"Look here," said Pamela, "I'll speak to her, if you like—just give her a hint not to bother you with questions. I won't tell her anything you don't want me to. Will you leave it to me—and trust me not to say too much?"

"Oh, Pamela, it is kind of you. If only you would— Of course I trust you— Just tell her what you think best.... Only I can't help feeling a coward for not

facing things myself..."

"That's all right. It's easier to do it for another person than it is for oneself," said Pamela. "And now you must go to sleep—you'll look all washed out in the morning if you don't. And, remember, we've got to *enjoy* our stay in this house—let's get all the fun out of it we can, shall we? ... Don't worry any more about Isobel—it'll be all right, you just see! ... Good-night, Beryl. And—Beryl—thank you for showing me your mother's letter."

When Pamela had gone Beryl cried a little more, but they were a different kind of tears this time, because she had found a friend, and her heart was full of gratitude.

After this Pamela took the first opportunity that occurred to speak with Isobel alone. She was not quite sure of the best way to deal with Isobel, but decided on the whole it would be best to tell her quite straightforwardly as much as she meant to tell her—arouse her sympathy and interest, but not her suspicions.

"I say, Isobel," she began, "I know something that I think you will be interested to hear—about Beryl."

Isobel pricked up her ears immediately.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You know you were wondering why she wore that short-sleeved silk blouse?"

"Yes," replied Isobel, smiling.

"You remember it amused you because it was unsuitable?"

"Yes," Isobel assented, and laughed.

"Well, Beryl only possesses two blouses in the world, at present—that silk one and another one; she wears them in turn, poor kiddy—and hates them both.... Her aunt, with whom she lived, chose them for her. She hasn't got any others, though she's going to buy some with her pocket-money now. She's very sensitive about her clothes."

"Oh," said Isobel, looking puzzled; she wondered how Pamela meant her to take the information.

"Well," said Pamela, looking straight into Isobel's eyes, so that Isobel presently began to feel vaguely uncomfortable, "I believe she has an idea that you laugh at them—and it hurts her. So I thought I'd tell you, because I know you wouldn't want to purposely hurt her."

"No, of course not. I didn't know—" began Isobel.

"She's had rather a rough time on the whole—losing her mother and father, and being brought up by an aunt with whom she is obviously not in sympathy—"

"Why, from what she's told me, I don't think she's had a particularly rough time," Isobel interrupted.

"She makes light of it, no doubt," Pamela replied. "But all the same she's not had a particularly happy time, and I would like her to be happy while she is here with us, wouldn't you?"

"Why, of course," agreed Isobel. "Why shouldn't she?"

"She tries to put her unhappy life behind her, but—well, you know, Isobel, you keep reminding her of it!"

"I keep reminding her! What do you mean?"

"I found her crying last night because you kept worrying her with questions," said Pamela bluntly.

Isobel flushed.

"Good gracious! How ridiculous! But I only ask her ordinary questions. Why should she mind that?"

"They're questions about the past unhappy life with her aunt—a time she wants to forget. You keep reviving it. And if she wants to forget—we have no right to force her to remember, have we?"

"Of course not," said Isobel, haughtily.

"I didn't mean to tell you about her crying, at first—but I guessed if you knew you wouldn't let it happen again. It was only because you didn't know. Where she went to school, what she did at her aunt's, where she bought her clothes—things like that don't really concern any of us—"

"Not if there's nothing to hide," said Isobel suddenly. "But it seems as if there is something in Beryl's case—and so she won't talk about it."

"Why on earth should there be anything to hide! If she's been unhappy—why should she wish to talk about it? Let her forget it. Come, Isobel, I know you'll be a good sport, and not bother her with any more questions. Let's give her a happy time while she's here, shan't we? Shake hands on it."

Isobel took Pamela's outstretched hand, but her dignity was still a little ruffled.

"Beryl seems to have made a lot of fuss—if there's nothing to hide," she said in a slightly offended tone.

"Oh, she's only extra sensitive.... Why ever should there be anything to hide!" repeated Pamela, feeling as if she had not been quite successful in convincing Isobel. "It's only that she's been unhappy—and she's been poor. Lack of money makes such a difference in one's confidence in one's self. It oughtn't to—but it does," she ruminated. "Anyway, you won't ask her any more questions, will you?"

"I shouldn't think of doing so—after what you've told me," Isobel replied coldly.

"Thanks so much," said Pamela, with genuine warmth. "We'll give her a real happy time while she's here."

And if Beryl's happiness had lain in the hands of these two girls, it would have been assured during the next few months. But, unfortunately, there was a third person in Barrowfield whose hands were to play an unexpected part in the future happiness of Beryl.

A black kitten was responsible for introducing Pamela to Elizabeth Bagg. Pamela found the kitten crying in a field—a soft, purry, rather frightened little kitten, that had lost its way. Pamela picked it up, and made inquiries about it in the village. No one seemed to own it, nor recognize it, at first; and then Aggie Jones, who was leaning out of her door as usual, said she believed it belonged to the Baggs.

So Pamela went up the little lane by the blacksmith's to inquire. She soon became aware of the vicinity of 'Alice Maud Villa.' As she walked along the lane her ears caught the sound of laughter and the shouting of children's voices, which proceeded from a small house on the right-hand side; also Pamela's nose informed her that a delicious smell of boiling toffee came from the same quarter. Then she came to the house, and saw the name painted over the doorway. It was a very clean-looking little house, with brightly polished door-knocker and letter-box, and the curtains were fresh and dainty.

Pamela knocked several times before anyone heard her, the noise inside the house being so great. Then the door was flung open and a swarm of little Baggs and a strong smell of cooked toffee came out to greet her.

The return of the kitten was hailed with joy, and Pamela, though glad to find its home, watched anxiously to see that the children did not pull the kitten about nor tease it. Pamela was very fond of animals, and had found the absence of a cat or a dog at Chequertrees very strange. She watched the little black kitten, and saw that it did not seem at all afraid of the children, and that, on the other hand, the children handled it very carefully, in the way that only children who have a real love for animals can handle a kitten. Pamela was relieved to notice this; she knew too many cases where a kitten had been thoughtlessly kept "for the children to play with," a practice she thought most bad for the children, who were not taught to treat animals kindly, and most cruel for the little teased kittens. However, there was nothing to worry over in this case, and when, a moment later, Elizabeth Bagg, in a holland overall, appeared in the doorway, Pamela, glancing at her pale, strong face, felt she understood why the children behaved gently to the kitten. There would be no thoughtless cruelty in the house Elizabeth Bagg ruled over.

She had a kindly face, with clear grey eyes and a frank expression. It was strange that with such different features, and with so pale a complexion, she yet had a strong resemblance to her ruddy-faced brother, the cabman. Her voice and

manners, though, were entirely unlike his. Her hair, which was jet black, was parted in the centre and brushed smoothly down each side of her face, and coiled in one thick plait round her head; it was a quaint style, rather severe, but it suited Elizabeth Bagg.

Pamela explained about the kitten, and then introduced herself, mentioning that she was staying at Chequertrees, and then, as was her usual way, plunged straight to the point that interested her most.

"I have been wanting very much to meet you," Pamela said, "because I hear that you are an artist. I do a little sketching myself, and I'm awfully interested in anyone who paints. Would you—would you think it very impertinent on my part if I asked to see some of your pictures. I should *love* to, if you don't mind—but only when it suits you, of course—not now, if you're busy."

A faint pink had crept into Elizabeth Bagg's cheeks.

"I should be pleased to show you some of my work," she said courteously. She spoke in a queer, stiff little way, so that until one knew her it was hard to understand exactly how she felt about anything.

Pamela, for instance, was not at all sure whether Elizabeth Bagg was pleased by her request or resented it. Whereas Elizabeth Bagg was really more astonished than anything else, though certainly pleased.

"Would you please come in," Elizabeth continued. "I'm not busy at present. The children and I have just finished making some toffee. I promised them last week that we should make some to-day."

"If they were very good, I suppose?" Pamela smiled down at the six little Baggs, who were standing round, gazing with open-mouthed interest at her.

"No," replied Elizabeth, to Pamela's surprise; "I had promised it them in any case."

"It smells delicious, anyway," said Pamela, not knowing quite what to reply.

"Would you like some when it's cool?" asked the little Bagg girl, who was least shy and most generous.

"If you can spare a little bit—yes, I would," laughed Pamela.

"The nutty kind—or the un-nutty kind?" anxiously inquired the elder Bagg boy, in a thick voice. He was rather greedy, and hoped Pamela would say the un-nutty, as he liked the nutty sort best himself. Fortunately she did choose the kind he liked least, and he eyed her with more favour than he had hitherto done.

The eldest of the children, a girl, was about eleven years old, and the youngest was about five. There were four girls and two boys, and Pamela noticed that they were all dressed in sensible linen overalls—things that were strongly made and easily washed. The children seemed to be a healthy, noisy, happy-go-lucky little crowd; but although Pamela was fond of children, she did not pay so much attention to the six little Baggs on this first visit as she did on subsequent

occasions. Her attention was centred on their aunt, and her pictures.

While Elizabeth Bagg took Pamela upstairs to her 'studio' the little Baggs disappeared into the kitchen to watch the toffee cooling, and with permission to break some of the toffee that had already set into small pieces; during which operation long and excited arguments seemed to occur with great frequency—arguments that more often than not ended in a scream or a howl. Hearing which, Elizabeth Bagg would put down the picture she was showing Pamela, and with a muttered apology would vanish downstairs, and restore peace.

Elizabeth Bagg's 'studio' was really her bedroom, but in the daytime, when the camp-bedstead was covered with a piece of flowered chintz, and the rest of the bedroom furniture made as inconspicuous as possible, the room served very well as a workroom. The walls were whitewashed, making a good background for Elizabeth's pictures, which were hung thickly all around. A few had frames—but only a few. Most of them were without. She seemed to do all kinds of subjects, from landscapes to quaint studies of children, painted in a bold, unusual style. On an easel by the window stood Elizabeth's latest study, half finished; Pamela was surprised to see that it was a painting of the old windmill that she herself had tried to sketch. As Pamela stood looking at it, she realized that there was something in Elizabeth Bagg's work that she herself would never be able to get. "I'm only a dabbler," thought Pamela to herself. "This is the real thing."

"It's splendid," said Pamela aloud, gazing at the picture with admiration. "Do you know"—she turned impulsively to Elizabeth, who was standing behind her—"it makes me feel as if I want to go home, and tear up all my drawings and start afresh. Your pictures are so—so alive. If only I could get that *living* touch into my work. But I feel I'll never be able to do it—when I think of my own things—and then look at this."

"I am more than double your age," said Elizabeth Bagg steadily, though her heart was beating rapidly at these, the first words of genuine praise and encouragement that she had had for a long time. "I have been working for many years past."

"That's not it," said Pamela, shaking her head. "There's something in your pictures, that if you had not got it *in* you, no amount of practice would produce. I can't explain any better than that—but you know what I mean, don't you? I think your work's fine.... Have you ever exhibited any of your pictures anywhere?"

Elizabeth Bagg shook her head.

"No," she replied, and a tinge of colour crept into her cheeks again.

"Oh, but you *should*," said Pamela, enthusiastically, looking at a charming study of a little girl in a red tam-o'-shanter.

Pamela's enthusiasm affected Elizabeth Bagg strangely. She felt suddenly much younger than she had felt for years past. It was so long since anyone had

noticed her pictures. Her days were spent in household duties for her brother and the children (just as Martha had told Pamela), with every spare half hour snatched for her painting. Some days, when she knew there would be no half hour to spare, Elizabeth would get up very early in the morning to continue a picture, and would feel all the fresher to face the work afterward, knowing that her picture was progressing, surely if slowly. Twice a week she gave painting lessons at a 'School for the Daughters of Gentlemen' in Inchmoor, a practice at which her brother had ceased to grumble when he found it brought her in a few shillings a week. He considered her 'daubing' a fearful waste of time; she had far better be employed in making a tasty apple-pie or mending the children's stockings, he thought—work for which Elizabeth received her 'board and lodging.' Old Tom Bagg flattered himself that he was good-naturedly indulgent to Elizabeth's little hobby, nevertheless Pamela noticed that there were no pictures of Elizabeth's anywhere about the house—they were all packed away in her own room.

Pamela did not know of the gratitude Elizabeth felt toward her; she only knew that she admired Elizabeth's pictures immensely, and felt a keen interest in the painter of them.

As Elizabeth said she would like very much to see some of Pamela's work, Pamela arranged to bring some round the following day.

And so the friendship began.

When Pamela reached Chequertrees that evening she wrote a long post-card home—for the first month was just ended. Surely there was never a card with so much written on it before—unless it was the card she received from home the following day, telling her that all was well at Oldminster.

CHAPTER XI

THE WISHING WELL

For a while things settled down into smoothly running order. Now that the first month had passed the days seemed to slip by in an amazing fashion—as they generally do after the newness of strange surroundings has worn off. The four girls got on very well together on the whole; of course, there were occasional little breezes—which was only natural considering that four such different tempera-

ments were thrown constantly into each other's society; but the breezes never gathered into a tempest, and always, before long, the sun was out again.

One of the breezes sprang up during the sixth week on account of a protest Isobel made regarding Caroline's choice of puddings. It was Caroline's turn again to arrange the week's meals, and it must certainly be admitted that to choose suet roly-poly on Monday and Thursday, apple dumplings on Tuesday, and boiled treacle roll on Wednesday and Friday, was, to say the least of it, asking for trouble. But when on the Saturday a solidly substantial Christmas pudding appeared, it was too much for Isobel, and she protested vigorously at the stodginess of Caroline's puddings.

Caroline, looking up from the solid slice of pudding on her plate, took the remarks badly, and after a few sullen replies got decidedly annoyed. She was making the most of her week, she said, because she knew she would not get another pudding worth calling a pudding until her turn came round again. Even the glories of Isobel's elaborate puddings—with cream and crystallized cherries on top—had failed to rouse any enthusiasm in Caroline. Those kinds of pudding were all right to look at, but they had 'no insides' to them, commented Caroline, as she passed her plate for a third helping of Christmas pudding.

Martha's patience and willingness in making the various kinds of pudding chosen were things to be marvelled at; but she seemed to take great pride and pleasure in showing her skill at cooking whatever the girls required. To be sure, there was no lack of praise for her from the four girls, who thoroughly appreciated her efforts to do her best for them.

"It always does me good to go and have a talk with Martha," Pamela would say. "She's so cheerful—and so willing and unselfish. Nothing is any trouble to her."

Martha never demurred at nor criticized any of the puddings chosen—not even Caroline's recurring choice of roly-polies, though she looked a trifle anxious and made them as light as possible.

"And on Friday we'll have boiled treacle roll," Caroline had informed her.

"And what's nicer!" Martha had replied, unaware of the chorus of muffled groans on the other side of the kitchen door, as three girls, rolling their eyes in an exaggerated manner, crept stealthily away along the passage.

Then on the Saturday had come Isobel's protest. Caroline maintained that she had a right to choose any puddings she liked during her week, and while quite agreeing with her as to this point, Pamela mentioned that she thought it would be more considerate of Caroline if she would make her choice a little less 'suety.' They discussed the matter thoroughly, and finally came to an agreement, Caroline undertaking to vary her choice if the others promised to have the kind of pudding that was *really* a pudding on one day in each week. And so matters

were arranged and the breeze blew over.

In spite of lack of encouragement or interest from the others, Caroline had sent in her name to Lady Prior's secretary as one who was willing to make things for the bazaar. And there had followed a day when two ladies of the organizing committee had called to see Caroline to talk about the articles that were most needed for the various stalls. It was a blissfully important day for Caroline, and she had dreams that night of crocheted cosy-covers, and little pink silk pin-cushions, and afterward, until the bazaar took place, was scarcely ever seen without knitting-needles or sewing of some kind or other in her hands.

The two committee ladies were both very large ladies, and were so well wrapped up in cloaks and scarves for motoring that they looked even larger than they really were. They drove up to the front gate in a very large motor car, and being ushered into the drawing-room by the respectful Ellen, both sat down on the small couch, which they succeeded in completely obscuring. They were both exceedingly amiable, and discussed matters in rather loud and assured voices with the bashful Caroline, who not only promised to make a number of things for the bazaar, but was eventually persuaded to preside at one of the stalls.

"All the stall-holders are to wear Japanese costumes. A charming idea, don't you think so?" smiled one of the ladies.

"A very, very sweet idea," said the other. "Of course, there will be no bother of getting the costumes ready; we are arranging to hire a number for the day. You'll have to come up and choose which one you like when the time draws near."

Caroline smiled, and said she thought it a nice idea. Fortunately, the fact that the Japanese style, with chrysanthemums in her hair, would not suit her in the least did not occur to Caroline. She was not a vain girl with regard to her appearance, though she was rather proud of her accomplishments in the sewing line.

But when Isobel heard about the Japanese costume for Caroline she nearly suffocated herself with laughter at the picture her mind's eye presented her with of solemn Caroline in a butterfly kimono and chrysanthemums pinned coquettishly above each ear. However, Caroline was not within hearing when Isobel learnt the news from Beryl, so no harm was done.

Isobel would have liked to join in the bazaar herself, but until she knew for certain about her relationship with the family at the Manor House, she decided that it was better not to lay herself open to the chance of meeting Lady Prior. Of course she had questioned Martha about the Priors, but nothing Martha could tell her shed any light on the Priors' connexions, as Sir Henry was practically a new-comer to Barrowfield, having bought the Manor House on the death of the late owner a few years ago.

As a rule Martha was a useful mine of information on people and places in Barrowfield, and many an interesting morsel of gossip had come to the girls through Martha.

It was through her, for instance, that they first heard of the Wishing Well.

One evening when Pamela was showing Martha a sketch she had made of an old barn and some pine trees, Martha said:

"Why, that's near the top of Long Lane, isn't it?—near where the Wishing Well is! And a very handsome picture it makes, to be sure."

"The Wishing Well!" said Pamela. "Where's that? It sounds exciting."

"Well, you know as you gets near the top of Long Lane," said Martha, busily stoning raisins into a basin that stood on the kitchen table, "on your right hand, as you're going up, you pass a white gate that leads into a field and an old disused chalk quarry—there's poppies and long grass growing all about in the summer—and there's a few trees at the top of the field, at the head of the scooped-out chalk-pit.... Well, a few yards inside the gate, on your left, and almost hidden by an overhanging hedge, is the well. You probably wouldn't notice it if you wasn't looking for it! But there it is, as sure as I'm sitting here, stoning these raisins—and Ellen will tell you the same as it's the truth I'm speaking."

"And why is it called a Wishing Well?" inquired Pamela.

"Oh, there's some old story that if you was to write a wish on a piece of paper and throw it into the well on a moonlight night, whatever you wished would come true," Martha chuckled. "But I don't know as I believes it—though I *did* have a wish that way once—in my young days, mind you—"

"And did it come true?" asked Pamela, eagerly.

"Well, no—I can't say it did," replied Martha, "but then, according to the story it was my fault. I ought to have kept it secret, and I went and spoke it out to some one, not thinking like—and so it didn't come true."

"Didn't you wish again ever?"

Martha shook her head. "You can only wish once—according to the story ... but mind you, I don't say there's any truth in it, one way or the other."

"But don't you know anyone else who has wished and who has had their wish granted?" asked Pamela, to whom the idea appealed strongly.

"I can't truthfully say I do—not for certain," said Martha. "Though I knows several what have *said* such and such a thing has happened because they wished it to—down the well—and it's their wish come true.... But how do I know they're speaking the truth? Eh? They mustn't tell what they've wished till it does come true, or else it won't come true at all. And when a thing happens, it's easy enough to say you wished it to, isn't it? ... So you see you can't rely on no one—not knowing how honest they are—but can only try for yourself and see."

"I should love to have a wish," said Pamela, gazing thoughtfully into the

glowing kitchen fire. "I like to *believe* I believe in Wishing Wells, and goblins and spells and enchantments and things like that, but I'm not really sure that I *do*.... Anyway, I think we might all go up Long Lane on a moonlight night, and have a wish—*just in case* it really is a Wishing Well.... I'm sure Beryl will love the idea—they all will, I think. You'll tell us just what to do, won't you, Martha?"

Martha laughed. "Yes, indeed," she said. "But, mind you, I don't say there's anything in it."

The outcome of this conversation was an excursion up Long Lane a few nights later when the moon was at the full. All four girls entered into the spirit of the adventure in high spirits, though Caroline rather spoilt the romantic glamour that Pamela had conjured up by insisting on wearing her goloshes in case she got her feet wet in the damp grass.

"Oh, Caroline, how *can* you! We ought not to speak of such things as goloshes—practical, matter-of-fact, everyday goloshes—in the same breath as Wishing Wells," said Pamela, in a mock tragic voice. "But still, I suppose it's very sensible of you," she added, laughing.

The four girls started off up Long Lane, chatting and laughing, each with a piece of paper and pencil to write her wish when the well was reached. It would be so much more romantic, Pamela said, to write it beside the well in the moonlight, rather than beside the dining-room table in the gaslight.

"I hope you each know what you're going to wish," said Isobel. "It'll be too chilly to stand about making up our minds when we get there."

Long Lane stretched from the blacksmith's forge, that stood on the same side of Barrowfield Green as Chequertrees, past Tom Bagg's house, and up the hill to a small inn, and a handful of scattered cottages a mile and a half away. The lane was set with high hedges on either side, and was a gradual ascent all the way.

As the girls drew near the top end, and the gate leading to the chalk quarry came in sight, they fell silent, each trying to put into shape the wish she was going to write in a few minutes.

The well was much as Martha had described, though even more hidden and overgrown with trails of creeper from a high bank of shrubs above it than they had expected to find. Pamela was obliged to draw the trails aside before they could see the dark, still water.

"Can you see the moon reflected in the water? We must make sure of that," reminded Beryl.

Long white clouds were drifting slowly across the face of the moon, but as they passed, and the moon emerged again, her reflection could be seen in the

well.

"Yes," said Pamela. "So—now—quick—let's write our wishes and wrap a stone inside the papers so that they'll sink—and drop them in the water while the moon's out." She looked up overhead. "It'll be clear for a few minutes now, but there are more clouds coming slowly—a long way off—and if they reach her we shall have to wait some minutes for them to pass."

A hurried search for convenient-sized stones was made; and then, silence, while they wrote down their wishes, using the top bar of the white gate as a writing-desk.

Pamela was the first to finish. At first Pamela had thought of wishing something for Michael; then she had thought of wishing that she could paint as well as Elizabeth Bagg; but "Michael and I are young," she had told herself, "and we've plenty of years to work in—but Elizabeth Bagg is getting old, and she's losing heart—I'll wish something for her.... I'll wish that somebody with influence, who can appreciate Elizabeth Bagg's artistic talent, may see some of her pictures, and that she may soon obtain the recognition which she well deserves." This was the gist of Pamela's wish. Wrapping a stone inside her paper, she threw it into the well—the moon's reflection scattering into a hundred shimmers and ripples as the stone splashed into the dark water and sank.

Isobel was the next ready. "I wish that I may do nothing to forfeit my fifty pounds," she had written, and her 'wish' followed quickly in the track of Pamela's.

For a wonder Caroline was finished third; but she knew when she started out exactly what she was going to wish. It concerned a little matter that had been fidgeting her careful soul for the last two days. "I wish I may find my silver thimble." Such was Caroline's wish, and it journeyed down after the other two just as Beryl finished writing hers.

Beryl had taken longer because she had had some difficulty in framing her wish, although when finished it seemed quite straightforward enough. "I wish I may never have to go back and live with Aunt Laura again," Beryl had written.

"Hurry up, and throw yours in, Beryl—the clouds are coming over," said Pamela, as she and Caroline and Isobel wandered a few paces away toward the chalk quarry. They were talking casually together when a slight scream from Beryl made them turn hastily round.

Beryl was running swiftly away from the well and toward the gate, which she pushed open, and ran into the lane.

The three other girls quickly followed and soon overtook her.

"Beryl! Wait a minute! Wait for us! What's the matter?" they called as they ran.

Beryl stopped running directly she heard their voices, and came to a standstill. She was looking very pale and scared as they came up to her.

"Whatever is the matter, old girl?" asked Pamela, taking hold of Beryl's arm.

"Oh, Pamela," she said, "I had just thrown my wish in the well, when the bush—the big overhanging bush close above—gave a rustle, and I heard some one laugh—such a horrid laugh—as if some one was hiding there, watching us. I—it gave me such a turn—I just ran—I didn't notice where you were—I just ran for the gate, to get away quickly."

Beryl seemed quite unnerved, and it was in vain that the others tried to persuade her that it was only her imagination.

"Shall we all go back together and make sure," suggested Pamela, not very enthusiastically it must be owned; but the others were certain it would not be wise to do this.

"It might be some horrible old tramp asleep in the hedge," said Isobel. "No. Let's get home—it's getting chilly—and we couldn't do any good really by going back, could we?"

So they all linked arms, and made their way home, where Martha was waiting up for them with a jug of hot milk.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH ELIZABETH BAGG PAINTS A PICTURE AND ISOBEL HEARS SOME PLEASANT NEWS

Pamela's friendship with the Bagg family developed rapidly, and she became a frequent visitor to 'Alice Maud Villa'—much to Isobel's amazement; Isobel was more than amazed, she was scandalized.

"I simply can't understand Pamela," confided Isobel to Caroline. "What can she find in those Baggs? Even if Elizabeth Bagg can sketch a bit—it's no excuse; they're not the *sort* of people Pamela should like to mix with. After all, Tom Bagg is only the village cabman! You can't get away from the fact, can you now? You know what I mean—they're not Pamela's sort somehow—I really am surprised at her taste."

But Isobel never said anything like this to Pamela. There was a certain air about Pamela at times that even Isobel respected, an air which, in the present case, made Isobel feel instinctively that Pamela would not brook any interference with her friendship with Elizabeth Bagg. So Isobel did not criticize openly Pamela's

attitude toward the Baggs; but she criticized, and wondered, and was amazed in private to Caroline, whenever she thought fit.

There were two things that Isobel was trying to avoid. One was meeting old Silas Sluff in the garden, and the other was, asking any more questions of Beryl. To avoid old Silas was fairly easy, as he seemed to be trying to keep out of her sight as much as possible. To refrain from questioning Beryl was hard at first, but, although at times intensely curious about some incident or other in connection with Beryl, Isobel remembered that she must be a sport, and managed to keep her tongue quiet. It needed a great effort sometimes, but she succeeded, which must certainly be put down to Isobel's credit.

As far as Pamela was concerned Isobel's approval or disapproval of her friendship with the Baggs never worried her in the least. The matter never even crossed her mind. She spent many happy hours in Elizabeth Bagg's 'studio' watching Elizabeth paint, or finishing a sketch of her own, helped on by valuable hints and suggestions from Elizabeth, who greatly encouraged Pamela in her work; just as Pamela helped Elizabeth by her interest and genuine admiration for Elizabeth's painting.

Sometimes, when they were both at work in the studio, Pamela would begin to argue with Elizabeth over her attitude toward her brother Tom and his views on her painting.

"He's no right to call it 'wasting time,'" Pamela would protest. "He ought to be *made* to understand what splendid work you are doing—valuable work, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"He doesn't care for pictures at all," Elizabeth would reply. "And it's no good crossing him—he's been very kind to me, you know, and has given me a roof over my head, and food to eat; I only have to buy my own clothes and my painting materials out of the money I earn by teaching; he provides everything else."

"But look what you do for him in return—cooking, washing, cleaning, and last, but by no means least, looking after his six children for him. How you manage to do it all I'm sure I don't know! And yet he doesn't even recognize that the work you love most is done up here—here in your studio—at all odd moments of the day. And he calls this 'wasting time.'" Pamela gave a short laugh. "Oh, it makes me so indignant," she said.

But her arguments were always in vain. Elizabeth would never make the smallest attempt toward making her brother respect her art, but would continue to go on as usual after Pamela had left, smiling quietly to herself at Pamela's enthusiasm and indignation.

"She is very young," Elizabeth would say to herself, and then give a sigh at the remembrance of when she herself was young and enthusiastic and indignant,

when she had dreamed of doing great things in the world of art—long before her sister-in-law had died, and she had come to keep house for her brother. Then, when she was young, it had been an invalid mother who had claimed all her attention, so that she had never had time nor opportunities to make friends with young people of her own age—young people who had interests in common with herself. She had painted and drawn in her spare time, and had even had a couple of terms at an art school, in the days before her mother had become a helpless invalid. Then, when her mother had died, it had been Elizabeth's intention to take a room in London by herself and set resolutely to work to earn a living by her painting; but before this plan could be put into execution news came that her aunt (Alice Maud) had met with an accident, and Elizabeth was asked to go and nurse her. She went. Elizabeth planned many things during her life, but other people always seemed to step in and alter the plans—and Elizabeth allowed them to be altered, and drifted into the new plans with little or no resistance. That was Elizabeth's chief failing, her inability to strike out for herself. As far as art was concerned it was a loss, but her relatives had certainly gained in having so willing and conscientious a worker to look after them in their illnesses. For it was always somebody who was ill that sent for Elizabeth. First, her mother, then her aunt, and finally, just when her thoughts were once again free to turn toward the room in London, her sister-in-law had begged her to come and look after her house and the children as she was taken dangerously ill. So Elizabeth came. And when her sister-in-law died she could not find it in her heart to refuse her brother Tom's request to stay with him and look after his six little motherless children.

Elizabeth used sometimes to dream about the wonderful room she had meant to have in London—the room where she liked to imagine that she would have painted pictures that would have brought her fame and wealth. As she grew older she began to doubt whether she ever would have painted pictures good enough or marketable enough even to pay for the rent of the room. She began to regret her want of initiative—after she had met Pamela. She regretted that she had all along allowed her own affairs to drift. Why had she always allowed others to rule her life, she wondered. She had worked hard at her pictures—and then done nothing with them when they were finished. There were scores of them packed one on top of the other on the shelves of a big cupboard in her studio.

Having got permission to look through this pile of pictures one day, Pamela discovered that Elizabeth was decidedly clever at portrait painting; the likenesses of one or two of the village folk, whom Pamela knew by sight, and of Tom Bagg, and of several of the little Baggs, were very well done indeed; and she asked Elizabeth why she did not do more of this kind of work.

"I haven't done any portraits for a long time," was all that Elizabeth replied. "I don't know why."

The discovery of this branch of Elizabeth's skill set Pamela thinking. Apart from his annoying indifference to his sister's talent Tom Bagg was a genial, good-natured, and quite likeable man, Pamela thought. She liked him more particularly after discovering him one evening sitting by the fire in his living-room, smoking, and telling a long fairy story to his children, who were gathered around him listening, enthralled. It was only occasionally that Daddy could be got to tell them a story; but when he chose he could tell a very good story indeed. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why he was so popular at the 'Blue Boar.' Ensclosed in a chimney-corner seat in the old-fashioned parlour of the 'Blue Boar,' he would puff away at his pipe, and yarn to a few bosom friends and occasional strangers for an hour at a stretch, much to the amusement of his audience. At home he was just as popular as a story-teller, and the children would listen enchanted to his tales of adventure, of fairies, and of pirates—and when he came to the humorous parts, where he always stopped to chuckle and shake before he told them the joke, the children could hardly contain their impatience, and while he paused aggravatingly to take a pull at his pipe and chuckle again, they would shower eager questions upon him, giving him no peace until he resumed the tale.

Elizabeth Bagg, when she was not upstairs in her studio, would sit in a corner by the fire on these occasions, mending stockings by firelight, and listening to the story, glancing up now and then at the cheerful, ruddy face of the teller, and at the children sitting on the hearth-rug, on the arms of his chair, and on his knees, all listening intently. The story-telling was always done by firelight; directly the gas was lit, it was supper and bedtime.

Pamela was present at more than one of these story-telling evenings. Old Tom Bagg was used to talking before strangers and new-comers, and her presence made no difference to him. He was always polite, and pleased to see Pamela, and never seemed outwardly surprised at her friendship with Elizabeth, though sometimes he would scratch the bald spot on his head and wonder to himself.

The first time Pamela saw the group in the firelit room listening to the story-telling she was struck with an idea, which she afterward communicated to Elizabeth.

"It would make a simply ripping picture—and you're so good at likenesses—I wonder you don't do it," she urged.

And, after a while, Elizabeth Bagg did do it. She set to work up in her studio, and began on a picture of Tom Bagg sitting in a firelit room telling a story to the children around him.

"Get the expression on his face when he's chuckling," said Pamela.

So Elizabeth watched him and caught the chuckling expression and transmitted it to her picture.

"*Absolutely*," was the delighted Pamela's verdict when she saw it; and her

enthusiasm roused Elizabeth to put her best work into the painting, although she had no future plans for it when it was finished. Possibly it would have drifted finally into the cupboard in her studio. Elizabeth, with her tiresome lack of initiative, would have taken no further trouble with the picture after it was done.

But Pamela had a plan for the firelight picture which she did not mention to Elizabeth Bagg, but waited eagerly for the completion of the painting.

Meanwhile Isobel, unable to get Pamela or Beryl to join in having dancing-lessons with her, had at length, much to her own surprise, prevailed on Caroline to come to Madame Clarence's with her twice a week. As Caroline sat over her sewing so much, and had very little exercise, these visits to the Dancing Academy probably did her a great deal of good. Not that she enjoyed dancing; but being persuaded that it was good for her health, she took her lessons regularly and solemnly, just as she would have taken medicine twice daily after meals had she thought she should do so. Although Isobel (to use her own expression) was not 'frightfully keen' on Caroline, yet she found her useful in yet another way besides being a companion to travel with to and from Inchmoor.

When Isobel heard that Sir Henry and Lady Prior and family had returned to the Manor House, she lived for a few days in a state of pleasurable expectation, from which state she was presently transported into one of intense joy. For she discovered that the Manor House Priors actually were connected with her—though very distantly, it must be confessed.

And Caroline was the medium through whom she learnt this eventful piece of news.

Finding that Caroline was the only one of the girls likely to get into immediate touch with Lady Prior, through the bazaar work-party meetings which Caroline had begun to attend, Isobel asked her if she would take the first opportunity of speaking to Lady Prior, and informing her that Isobel Prior, who was staying at Chequertrees, would have liked beyond anything to help at the bazaar only she was afraid she was restricted from doing so by the instructions of Miss Crabingway, who had said that none of the girls staying at Chequertrees were to visit or be visited by any relations whatsoever; and Isobel thought it possible that she might be a relation of Lady Prior's. Of course, Isobel impressed upon Caroline that she was to be sure to say that Miss Crabingway did not know that this restriction of hers might apply in any way to Lady Prior, or she would assuredly not have made such a rule. Then Isobel asked Caroline to explain all about Miss Crabingway's whim, and to make matters quite clear to her ladyship. She also wrote down for Caroline all the facts about the Prior family-tree that she knew, giving her father's full name, and age, and profession, and the names

of his various brothers, cousins, uncles, and so on.

All this Caroline faithfully related to Lady Prior in due course, and came back from her first interview with the news that Lady Prior was going to consult Sir Henry about it, and would tell Caroline what he said at the next meeting, as she did not know any of the Christian names of the gentlemen Caroline had mentioned, but was quite amused at Miss Crabingway's queer instructions.

Isobel was somewhat chilled by this news, and wondered to herself whether the 'dowdy-looking' Caroline had prejudiced her case in Lady Prior's eyes.

"Of course, never having seen me she may think I'm something of the same class as the friend I choose to act as my deputy," thought Isobel to herself, and eyed the unconscious Caroline with secret disfavour.

However, Caroline returned from the next bazaar meeting with better news. Sir Henry had informed Lady Prior that Mr Gerald Prior of Lancaster Gate and Ibstone House, Lower Marling, was a third cousin of his, whom he had never seen, though he had heard of him. This put fresh heart into Isobel, and she went to church the following Sunday to see what the Priors looked like—though she took care to keep a safe distance in case any unforeseen accident should happen, and she should meet them. She wondered what the mater would do under the circumstances. But, contemplating that when the six months elapsed she would be free to go and visit these new-found relatives, and be fifty pounds the richer for the waiting, she decided that it was wiser to wait, especially as Lady Prior now knew the circumstances and would understand.

So she gazed on the Prior pew from a distance, and noted with pride the rich and fashionable clothes its occupants wore, and the respect the family seemed to awaken in the other members of the congregation.

Though Isobel did not want to own it, even to herself, she was somewhat disappointed in the facial appearance of her father's third cousin and his family. Sir Henry himself was small and pompous, with sandy hair and moustache, and his broad, pinkish face was plentifully besprinkled with freckles; he wore glasses which were rather troublesome to keep on the flat bridge of his wide, short nose. His eyebrows were invisible from a distance, but his gold watch-chain and the diamond in the gold ring on the little finger of his right hand sparkled and glistened in the sunshine that streamed through the stained-glass windows.

Lady Prior was well preserved and had evidently been pretty in her youth, but now she was inclined to be plump, and had developed a double-chin, and a florid complexion; her mouth was too small for the rest of her features, making her nose look too prominent; her eyes were large and good. The two daughters of the house next claimed Isobel's attention; they were upright, pleasant-looking girls with their mother's features, but their father's colouring—freckles included. Nevertheless there was a certain air about them which Isobel could find no more

fitting term for than 'distinguished.' She had learnt from Caroline that there was also a son of the house, but he was not present that morning in church.

Isobel gazed from afar, and then went home to Chequertrees feeling rather out of humour with everything and everybody because of the 'silly whim' of Miss Crabingway's which had cut her off from these desirable relations.

When the girls had almost completed the third month of their stay at Chequertrees Martha reminded them that they would possibly receive a communication from Mr Joseph Siggleshorne shortly, with whom Miss Crabingway had left instructions concerning the replenishing of the funds of the household. Supplies were running out, Martha said, and she hoped they would hear promptly.

But several days went by and no word came from Mr Siggleshorne (for the very good reason that he had forgotten all about them).

Then one morning a letter posted in Scotland arrived from Miss Emily Crabingway. It was very brief, and merely instructed Pamela, Beryl, Isobel, and Caroline to go up to London with Martha on the day following the receipt of letter, and deliver the envelope which was enclosed to Mr Joseph Siggleshorne at his rooms in Fig Tree Court, Temple, E.C.

"What can this mean?" said Pamela, after she had read the letter to Martha.

Martha smiled and shook her head. "Unless it is that Miss Crabingway knows what a forgetful gentleman Mr Siggleshorne is, and wants to give him a shock by sending you all to remind him," she suggested.

It may as well be stated here that this was not Martha's own idea, but one communicated to her in a recent note from Miss Crabingway.

As this would be the first journey to town that the girls had made since they came to Barrowfield, they were rather excited and pleased, and set about making plans for the morrow's journey in high good spirits; they recalled for each other's benefit their previous meeting with Mr Siggleshorne. It was decided to lock up the house, as Ellen said rather than stay at home alone all day she would go and visit some friends in the village, who had been begging her to come and see them for a long time, and would meet their train at the station on their return. This matter being satisfactorily arranged, and time-tables consulted, clothes overlooked and holes in gloves mended, the four girls ended the day with another dance in the drawing-room to celebrate their 'one day's release' from Barrowfield, as Isobel put it.

The next day was fine and warm, though a few mackerel clouds high in the sky made it difficult to dissuade Caroline from putting on her goloshes and taking an umbrella. Poor Caroline, her little fads were always being laughed at by the other three! But she took all their remarks very good-naturedly as a rule. Her

umbrella she did eventually abandon, reluctantly, but she took a small canvas bag with her, which she said contained her purse and handkerchief, and some knitting to do in the train. But there was more in it than these things; the bulge at the side of the bag was a very tightly-rolled, light-weight mackintosh, and the bulge at the bottom was the much-ridiculed goloshes. Caroline did not explain the bulges, and the girls were too busy with their own affairs by the time she came downstairs with her bag to bother to tease her any more.

And so the four girls and Martha set out to visit Mr Joseph Sigglesthorne.

CHAPTER XIII

MR JOSEPH SIGGLESTHORNE FORGETS THE DATE

The journey to town was accomplished swiftly and comfortably, and was enlivened every now and then by Martha's remarks on the changes that had come over the country they passed through in the train since she was a girl. She made a quaint little figure in her black bonnet, trimmed with jet beads, and her best black cape with the silk fringe round it, and her black serge skirt. Her kindly grey eyes and wrinkled face were alight with interest as she sat beaming and chatting with Beryl and Pamela, while Caroline steadily knitted, and Isobel in the farther corner gazed out of the window. Although she liked Martha well enough, she rather wished that Miss Crabingway had sent the four of them to town alone.

When they arrived at Marylebone station the girls learnt to their surprise that Martha had never been in the tube railway in her life, and was somewhat chary and suspicious of this mode of travelling; however, encouraged by Pamela and Beryl, who each linked hold of one of her arms, she was persuaded to enter the lift, which she mistook at first for the train, until matters were explained to her.

They changed at Charing Cross on to the District Railway and were soon at the Temple Station, and after one or two inquiries at length found themselves walking up Middle Temple Lane *en route* for Fig Tree Court.

It is not one of the prettiest courts, Fig Tree Court, although it has such a picturesque name. There is no fig-tree growing there now, though if there had been one Mr Sigglesthorne would not have been able to see it, as his windows were so begrimed with dust and dirt that nothing was clearly visible through them. The window-cleaners, if ever he employed them, must surely have charged

him three times the usual amount to get his windows clean again. As for Martha, directly she set eyes on them her hands itched to get hold of a wash-leather.

Mr Sigglesthorne lived on the first floor, and they were soon outside the door with his name printed on it in large black letters. Pamela knocked with a double rat-tat. All was silent within for a few moments, then the creak of an inner door and a shuffling step could be heard. The latch clicked and the front door was opened just enough for a hand and arm to be thrust out.

The five visitors stood gazing in silent surprise at the open hand—a hand obviously waiting for something to be placed in its grasp. They stood thus, looking first at the hand and then at each other, and Isobel was just about to laugh outright when a voice behind the door exclaimed impatiently:

“Hurry up, milkman! Half-pint, as usual.”

At this Isobel could control herself no longer, but burst out laughing, and the others, unable to resist, joined in as well.

This caused the door to be opened wider, and a very shocked and surprised Mr Joseph Sigglesthorne was revealed, who stared open-mouthed in pained astonishment at the laughing group outside.

Pamela was the first to recover herself. “Oh, Mr Sigglesthorne,” she said, “I’m so sorry—please excuse us, but Miss Crabingway told us to come and give you this letter.”

“Well, to be sure! But please excuse me—I was so—if I may say so—taken aback for the moment—” stammered Mr Sigglesthorne. “But please to step inside—step inside.” He held the door open wide.

The five visitors stepped inside as requested, almost filling up the narrow little passage from which the two rooms of Mr Sigglesthorne’s flat opened. Mr Sigglesthorne closed the front door, and led the way to his living-room, begging them all to come in and be seated. He was still rather bewildered by the suddenness of his visitors’ appearance, and was thrown into confusion on finding that there was only one chair in the room that was not too rickety to be used. He handed this with great politeness to Pamela, who promptly passed it on to Martha, who was too respectful to think of sitting down till all the others had found seats.

“It’s quite all right,” said Pamela. “May I sit on this box? Thanks. It’ll do splendidly. You sit down, Martha—you’ll be tired.”

Finally, an old oak chest being cleared of numberless papers and books and brought forward for Isobel and Caroline, and a pile of six big Encyclopædias placed one on top of the other serving as a seat for Beryl, Mr Sigglesthorne sat down on the corner of the coal-scuttle, comforting himself with the thought that things might have been worse—although he wished he had not left his bunch of collars on the mantelshelf. Strange that this should have worried him, for on the

whole the mantelshelf was the least untidy part of the room.

Martha's neat and tidy soul positively ached when she looked round Mr Sigglesythorne's living-room. One of the first things she noticed was a big round table in the centre of the room on which were stacked books and papers in a litter of untidiness and confusion; there were several bundles of newspapers, and cardboard boot-boxes without lids, containing a variety of interesting articles from press-cuttings and collar-studs to india-rubber and knots of string. On the top of the highest pile of papers reposed Mr Sigglesythorne's top-hat. The table was so littered that it was impossible to think of it ever being used for any other purpose than that of a home of refuge for old papers. Underneath the table, partly obscured by the faded green table-cloth that hung all askant, was a Tate sugar-box containing—what? Coal, probably—but Martha could not be quite sure of that. Bookshelves lined the walls, and here again confusion reigned. Hardly a single book stood upright; a few, here and there, made a faint appearance of doing so, but for the most part they had given up the struggle long ago and just sprawled across the shelves anyhow—some upside down, some back to front—separated every few yards by some useful kitchen utensil, such as a toasting-fork, a small hand-brush, a pepper-box, a shovel, a couple of saucepan lids, and so on. There were no books at all on one of the shelves, but a mass of letters and envelopes filled the space. A broken rocking-chair beneath one of the two windows that lighted the room held a box of tools and Mr Sigglesythorne's topcoat, and the desk under the other window supported a tray with the remnants of a chop on a plate, a cup half full of cold coffee, and a tin of condensed milk with a spoon sticking out of it; two inkpots and a blotting-pad, and numerous pens, pencils, notebooks, and stacks of papers occupied the rest of the desk. In the hearth were a pair of old boots, a teapot, and three bundles of firewood.

It looked as if Mr Sigglesythorne was in the habit of placing things down just wherever he happened to be at the moment—which was handy at the time, but caused much confusion and delay in the long run; though it may have added a little variety to his life to find his belongings where he least expected them.

Mr Sigglesythorne, with his Shakespearean forehead shining in a distinguished manner, sat on the coal-scuttle polishing his glasses and gazing nervously round at his guests. His black velvet jacket, minus a button, wanted brushing, and his dark grey trousers were creased and baggy; altogether he looked shabby and unimposing—except for his forehead, which just, as it were, kept his head above water.

"Now, if I may be permitted to see Miss Crabingway's note?" he said. "You must excuse my room being slightly untidy—a bachelor's misfortune, you know, Miss Pamela."

"What a lot of books you have," said Pamela.

"Are you a lawyer?" asked Isobel.

"Heaven forbid!" said Mr Sigglesythorne. "No, miss. But I am rather a—bookworm. Ha! Ha! Yes, that's what I am—a bookworm."

This idea seemed to afford him much private amusement, until putting on his glasses and opening Miss Crabingway's note his eyes fell on the contents, and he at once became grave. It was just as if Miss Crabingway were standing before him, speaking.

"Well, Joseph Sigglesythorne," the note ran, "so you have forgotten, as I knew you would. There is no excuse—I gave you three calendars, which you have not hung on the wall, by the by, but have stowed away out of sight—you've forgotten where."

(This was quite true, as Mr Sigglesythorne realized, as he stroked the back of his head and tried to recall what he had done with the calendars.)

"The money I trusted you with is overdue. Kindly hand the deal box and key to Miss Pamela there, and ask her to take out the notes."

"Ah, yes," said Mr Sigglesythorne aloud, as if Miss Crabingway were indeed in the room waiting for him to apologize. "Very thoughtless of me, I'm sure."

It may be thought remarkable that Mr Sigglesythorne should have remembered where the deal box was. But Mr Sigglesythorne always remembered where he had put money—a peculiarity of his that Miss Crabingway knew well.

And now he was full of remorse at having failed Miss Crabingway in regard to the date—for she had paid him well to remember. Mr Sigglesythorne's clothes and surroundings might have led one to think that he was none too well off, but this idea would have been wrong—with regard to the present, at any rate. Besides Miss Crabingway's money payments, he had lately got some 'research' work—this latter fact he mentioned to his visitors with some pride, and partly to account for the piles of papers abounding everywhere. He left them to think this piece of news over while he retired to another room to fetch the deal box.

While he was gone Martha rolled her eyes upward, and raised her hands in despair.

"How I *should* like to set to and tidy up a bit for him, poor gentleman," she sighed.

"It's more than I'd like to do," said Isobel. "*What* a muddle!"

"He'd probably be annoyed if anyone upset his research papers," said Pamela. "But, good gracious! I don't know how he can ever find anything again—once he puts it down."

"He probably doesn't find it again," said Isobel, laughing.

As for Caroline, with whom neatness was almost a passion, she was fairly numbed by the scene before her, and could only sigh deeply and shake her head. Beryl was always shy in strange places, and, whatever her thoughts, she kept

silent.

Mr Sigglesthorne shortly returned, and with renewed apologies for forgetting to bring the box down to Barrowfield presented a small deal box and key to Pamela, requesting her to open it. Inside were a number of bank-notes, which she was told to take out and distribute—so much to Martha for housekeeping expenses and so much to herself and each of the other girls for 'pocket money.' Having done this, she signed a receipt and placed it in the box, which Mr Sigglesthorne locked and took away again.

Finding that they did not know the Temple well, Mr Sigglesthorne insisted on putting on his coat and top-hat and coming out with them. Pamela protested that they did not wish to take him away from his research work, but he vowed he would have plenty of time if he returned within half an hour. So he trotted beside them, talking and waving his hand, first on one side and then the other, giving them a very confused idea of the plan of the Temple and its history. But, at any rate, Mr Sigglesthorne enjoyed himself. And when he finally left them in the Strand, with more apologies, Pamela saw him disappear toward the Temple again with a smile on her face that had more of regret in it than amusement; but her regret was evidently not shared by Isobel, who said:

"Well, thank goodness! Now we can get on, and enjoy ourselves."

They did a round of sight-seeing to make the most of the day in town, and had dinner at a restaurant, where Martha, though very nervous, was nevertheless very critical, in her own mind, about the dishes served. She guessed she could make better white sauce than was served at this place, though she was curious to know how the cream pudding was made.

The girls wished they had arranged to end up the day at a theatre, but they had not thought of this in time to let Ellen know, and she would be at Barrowfield station waiting at nine o'clock. So they were obliged to relinquish this idea, with much regret.

As they turned away from the restaurant Pamela suddenly gave a start—stood stock still for a moment, then, bending her head, hurried on. She had caught a glimpse of her father just getting into a bus. The sight of him caused a great wave of longing and home-sickness to rush over her, so that it was all she could do to restrain herself from running back toward him. To her embarrassment she found that her eyes were full of tears. He looked just the same dear old father. She had not realized till now how badly she had wanted to see them all at home again; she knew she had wanted them, but had stifled the longing as much as possible. She wondered how her mother looked—and Michael—and the others. The post-card she received from home each month was crammed full of news—but even so, post-cards are very unsatisfying things.

As her agitation became obvious to her companions, and they inquired

what was the matter she was obliged to explain a little.

"I didn't realize how *badly* I wanted to see my people again—till I saw him," she concluded.

"Well, half the time is up now," said Isobel. "I think it was a very silly restriction of Miss Crabingway's— But there you are! And fifty pounds is not to be sneezed at, is it?"

Much to every one's dismay, except Caroline's, it now began to rain—suddenly and heavily—and a rush was made for the nearest tube station. Caroline hastily donned her mackintosh, and stopping in a doorway slipped on her goloshes, before she ran through the rain to the tube. Her triumph was short-lived, however, because once inside the tube they were under cover all the way until they arrived at Barrowfield station, very sleepy and chilly with sitting still so long in the train.

Ellen was at the station, and she had actually brought umbrellas for them. Secretly, although not an ill-natured girl, Caroline had half-hoped they would have had to tramp home through the rain—then perhaps they wouldn't have teased her another time, she thought.

However, under the umbrellas they walked—the village fly being engaged elsewhere that evening, otherwise Thomas Bagg would have been hired to take them home.

And then Beryl would not have bumped into some one—also under an umbrella—who was coming from the village toward the station.

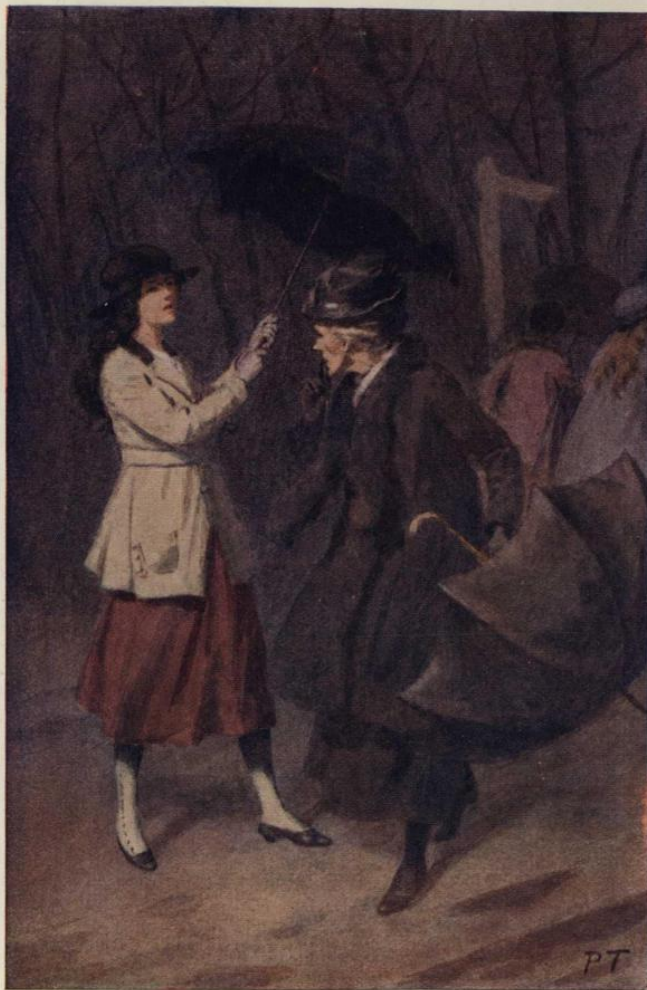
As a rather high wind was blowing it was necessary to hold an umbrella down close over the top of your head, and so Beryl did not notice anyone coming toward her till her umbrella caught against another umbrella; both umbrellas were lifted for a moment—and in that moment Beryl saw a woman looking at her from under the other umbrella, a woman who frowned and put her forefinger to her lips as if enjoining silence.

Beryl stifled a scream and ran quickly forward and joined the others, keeping as close to Pamela as she could till they reached home.

While the woman, with a quick backward glance at the receding group, continued on her way, limping hurriedly up the hill.

CHAPTER XIV

CAROLINE MAKES A DISCOVERY



A WOMAN WHO FROWNED AND PUT HER FOREFINGER
TO HER LIPS

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*A WOMAN WHO FROWNED AND PUT HER FOREFINGER TO HER
LIPS*

Pamela was just dropping off to sleep that night when some one tapped on her bedroom door. She roused herself, and called out:

"Who's there?"

"May I come in a minute? It's only I—Caroline," the answer came in a loud whisper.

"Oh—yes—yes—come in," she said, sitting up, only half awake as yet.

Caroline came in, a lighted candle in her hand. She was fully dressed, and had not even untied her hair. She looked a bit scared and puzzled. Closing the door softly behind her she crossed to the side of Pamela's bed.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she said solemnly, "but I didn't think you'd be in bed yet—I haven't even started to get undressed—I—I don't like the look of my room!"

"Don't like the look of your room! Whatever do you mean, Caroline?" Pamela rubbed her eyes.

"Well, some one's been moving things. There are several things out of their usual places. I—I believe somebody has been in the room while we've been out to-day!"

Pamela was wide awake now.

"Oh, Caroline,—you don't mean burglars? There's nothing missing, is there? Has anything been taken?"

"No. Not so far as I can see," replied Caroline. "But things have been disturbed."

"I'll come in with you and have a look," said Pamela, springing up and hastily donning dressing-gown and slippers. "H'sh. We mustn't wake the others unless it's necessary. They're all so tired."

"I didn't notice anything just at first," said Caroline, as they entered her room.

"I don't notice anything now," remarked Pamela, looking round at the neat and orderly chamber.

"Wait a minute," said Caroline. "Look here—" and she pulled open one of the drawers in her dressing-table.

"Well?" said Pamela, who could see nothing amiss with the contents of the drawer.

"Well!" echoed Caroline rather indignantly, "I never leave my drawers like this. See—these gloves were folded together in that corner—and these ribbons here—and I always keep my handkerchiefs on top of each other at this side—These handkerchiefs are all arranged anyhow. I *know* I didn't leave them like this! ... And look here—on the mantelpiece—these photo frames have been shifted—and on this chair by the window my brown scarf which I left folded on the seat was on the floor!"

"Oh, come," said Pamela. "That might easily have slid off. The main point is—is there anything missing?"

"Nothing so far," replied Caroline. "But some one *has* been in here moving my things—I'm certain of it. I know just the way I always leave my belongings. I always put them in the same places and in the same positions."

She seemed so positive that Pamela was silenced. Anyone else but Caroline would probably not have noticed that anything had been disturbed in their room.

"Well—what shall we do?" said Pamela, who really thought that Caroline was under a delusion. She couldn't see anything wrong with the room. "If we wake everybody up we shall only scare them—it isn't as if you'd missed anything. That would be a different matter. I suppose you've searched all over the room? Of course, you've made sure there's no one hiding here now?"

"Oh, yes," said Caroline; but to make doubly sure she and Pamela searched again thoroughly. They looked in the wardrobe, behind the wardrobe, under the bed, behind the chest of drawers, and in and under every likely and unlikely place in the room.

"Have you looked in the soap-dish?" said Pamela, jokingly.

But Caroline did not laugh; she continued her search solemnly. Suddenly an exclamation from her made Pamela wheel round.

"Just fancy that!" said Caroline, still on her knees, after an attempt to look under the chest of drawers—a space of about six inches from the ground. "Look here, Pamela! Here's my silver thimble! The one I couldn't find—under the edge of the carpet beneath this chest of drawers. And I've looked everywhere for it—but here. It must have rolled off the back of the chest, and got wedged under the carpet."

"What luck! The search hasn't been wasted after all then," remarked Pamela, stifling a yawn.

"And it is my wish come true," said Caroline slowly.

"What! About the thimble! Is that what you wished?" cried Pamela.

"Yes," said Caroline. "I didn't know what else to wish—and I couldn't find my silver thimble that my grandmother gave me—so I thought I'd wish about that."

"I see," said Pamela, trying hard not to smile. "Well, your wish has come true. You lucky girl! I only hope the rest of us are as fortunate."

After this Caroline reluctantly agreed to go to bed, and not to bother any further about the things in her room being disturbed until the morning, when Pamela promised to make full inquiries and sift the matter thoroughly. Pamela felt fairly certain in her own mind that no one had been in Caroline's room or she would not have let the matter drop so easily. Both girls being now very tired after their long day in town they soon dropped into their beds and went off to

sleep.

Caroline referred to the matter over breakfast in the morning, thereby incurring a great deal of attention and questioning from the others—which made her feel quite important for once in a way. Caroline was one of those people who could not usually attract much attention from others, as she was unable to talk interestingly about things. But this morning she found she was actually being interesting; she liked the sensation, and meant to make the most of it.

While Pamela and Isobel discussed the matter with Caroline, Beryl, who had turned very white, sat silent, her half-finished breakfast pushed on one side; she sat stirring her tea mechanically round and round—only breaking her silence once to ask Caroline if she had missed anything, and seemed relieved on hearing that Caroline had not.

"I suppose nobody else's room was disturbed in any way?" said Pamela, adding, "Mine was all right."

"So was mine," said Isobel.

"And mine," echoed Beryl, quickly.

"Well, we'll just go and ask Ellen if she can throw any light on the matter, shall we?" said Pamela. "She was the only inmate of this house who was not up in London yesterday."

Ellen was very interested, but it did not seem as if she could help to solve the question. She had certainly not been in the room herself; she had left the house at the same time as they did yesterday, and when she and Millicent Jackson—the friend with whom she had spent the day—had come in to fetch the umbrellas to bring to the station in the evening, they had not been upstairs at all. They had let themselves in at the back door, gone straight through to the hall, taken the umbrellas out of the stand, and gone out of the front door. They weren't in the house five minutes, as they were in a hurry to get to the station in time.

"There, Caroline!" said Isobel. "You see nobody could have been in your room. You must have moved the things yourself."

But Caroline shook her head.

"Could anyone have slipped in the back door after you—without you noticing?" she asked Ellen.

"Oh, miss! Well—I never thought of that!" said Ellen, then hesitated. "Of course, they could have, Miss Caroline—but it's most unlikely. If anyone had troubled to do that they would have taken something while they were about it, wouldn't they?"

Caroline shrugged her shoulders.

"All I know is—the things in my room were disturbed," she insisted doggedly. "And I don't like it."

"How could anyone have slipped in without you seeing, Ellen?" inquired

Pamela.

"Well, Miss Pamela, to be exact," explained Ellen, "me an' Millicent unlocked the back door and came in, shut the door, and went into the kitchen, where I struck a match and lit the candle that we keep on the dresser here. We didn't bother to light the gas as we was going straight through, and out the front way. Me an' Millicent was talking, interested-like, as we went into the hall, when Millicent says, 'Oh, did you lock the back door again?' And I says, 'Oh, no.' And I went back and locked it.... Then we got the umbrellas and went straight out the front way.... Now, *do* you think anyone would have got in just in that minute before I locked the back door, Miss Pamela? Now *do* you, Miss Caroline?"

"It's just possible, of course, but not at all likely," said Pamela. "Thanks very much, Ellen—as nothing has been missed, I really don't see any use in pursuing the matter further, Caroline, do you? ... And it's such a grand morning, let's all go for a good tramp over the hills."

So Pamela dismissed the incident from her mind; and Isobel, putting it down to "one of the bees in old Caroline's bonnet," soon followed suit. Ellen and Martha discussed the matter together, and Ellen repeated her story to Martha several times—each time with more emphasis than the last; and when she next saw Millicent Jackson she mentioned it to her, and they talked of it until the subject was exhausted—then as nothing further happened to make them remember it, they too forgot it. Caroline remembered it as a grievance for a considerable time, then the excitement of the coming bazaar caused it to fade into the background. The only one who did not forget the incident was Beryl, and she had good reason to remember it—as we shall presently see.

After the visit to London a marked change seemed to come over Beryl; always pale and nervous, she appeared to grow even paler and more nervous as the days went by. At times she would emerge from the cloud of depression which seemed so often to envelop her now and join light-heartedly in whatever was going on, but these occasions grew more and more rare.

When Pamela remarked on her paleness one day Beryl put it down to the weather, saying it made her feel tired. Pamela believed her; had she not been so absorbed in Elizabeth Bagg and her work she might have noticed things that would have aroused her suspicions; but she was not suspicious in any way until one evening Beryl, very awkward and hesitating, asked Pamela if she would lend her a sovereign. Pamela did not voice the surprise she showed in her face—surprise because the pocket-money handed over to each of them by Mr Sigglesthorpe had been quite generous and sufficient for the few expenses the girls would be likely to incur in Barrowfield during the remainder of their stay. However, she lent the money at once, and willingly, and asked no questions—for which Beryl seemed very grateful.

Feeling a little uneasy about the matter, and wishing to help her if possible, Pamela made several opportunities for Beryl to confide in her if she had wished to do so. But Beryl did not seem to wish to do so.

CHAPTER XV

ABOUT A BAZAAR AND A MEETING IN THE RUINED WINDMILL

The bazaar, for which Caroline had been sewing so perseveringly, was held in the grounds of the Manor House on a beautiful sunny day at the end of May. Caroline spent a blissful afternoon, dressed in a Japanese kimono with chrysanthemums in her hair, surrounded by tea-cosies and cushion-covers and hand-embroidered scarves; and she had quite a brisk sale at her stall, in spite of exorbitant prices.

The spacious lawn below the terraced flower-garden was a delightful picture; the soft, velvety grass and the cool shade under the trees that bordered it making a pleasing background for the dainty kimonoed figures that tripped to and fro among the bamboo stalls with their white umbrella-shaped awnings. As the general public began to make its appearance, the colours in the summer dresses that moved across the lawn became as variegated as the flower-garden itself.

Lady Prior stood on the terrace and looked down with a pleased smile at the animated scene beneath her.

"The village looks forward so eagerly to this each year," she remarked to a friend. "You see, there is absolutely nowhere for them to go as a rule, poor creatures. This is quite an event for them." And she raised her eyebrows and gave a little rippling laugh.

Meanwhile the poor creatures were spending their money as they were able, and the local reporter, who was wandering among the stalls, was mentally calculating how big a sum of money he would be able to announce in next week's *Observer* as the result of Lady Prior's Annual Bazaar. Most of the village seemed out to enjoy itself at all costs; but now and again one would come across a gloomy individual who looked like an unwilling victim of this annual institution. In some cases, as one little old woman grumbled to Caroline, people came because they had been badgered and worried into promising to attend by one of the industrious members of the committee.

"And there's so much questioning, and reproachful looks, an' cold stares

afterward—if you don't come," she grumbled, fingering the various articles on Caroline's stall, "that you come for peace sake.... Though I'd much rather be sittin' at 'ome an' 'aving a cup of tea in peace and quietness and restin' my old bones—it's all very well for young folk to come gallivantin' and spendin' their savings—but when you're old—! ... 'Ow much is this? What is it? Eh? An egg-cosy! ... Oh, give me one of them six-penny 'air-tidies—it'll do for my daughter in London. I ain't got no 'air to speak of myself. But my daughter—her 'air comes out in 'andfulls—you ought to see it! ... You've got nothing else for six-pence, I suppose? No? ... I won't 'ave anything else then."

And the little old woman took the hair-tidy and made her way straight to the gates, apparently making a bee-line for home, having fulfilled her duty.

Caroline was not critical—she took things very much as a matter of course, and did not feel ashamed for the handsomely dressed lady from a neighbouring village who inquired in a loud voice for the stall where the 'pore clothes' were for sale. Caroline did not quite understand at first, until another stall-holder explained that Mrs Lester always purchased a number of garments to distribute among the deserving poor of her parish. The garments Mrs Lester bought looked a bit clumsy, and were made all alike, of rather coarse material, but "she's awfully good to the poor, you know," Caroline was told; and there the matter ended, until she recounted the incident to the others when she got home, and provoked a stormy protest from Pamela against the way in which rich people were 'good to the poor.'

"Why can't they be more tactful," asked Pamela. "Of course I know lots of them are—but I mean people like this Mrs Lester."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Pamela," said Isobel, laughing. "What do poor people want with tact? Give them a good meal or a bundle of clothes and they'll pretend to be grateful and satisfied and all that, and directly your back is turned they'll grumble because you haven't given them *more*. They always want more—they don't want tact!"

Pamela stared for a moment at Isobel, who was reclining gracefully on the sofa, amusement in every line of her face at Pamela's ideas.

"Good gracious, Isobel! I can see a perfectly horrible future in store for you," Pamela said quietly. "You are going to be another Mrs Lester."

"What of it?" laughed Isobel. "As long as I am as rich as she is, there are no horrors for me."

"Anyway, I'm sorry for you," said Pamela earnestly.

"What on earth for?" asked Isobel, slightly nettled.

"Because you'll miss some of the best things in life," replied Pamela.

"Not if I'm rich, I shan't," said Isobel.

Caroline had listened in mild surprise at all this. It had never struck her

that there could be anything to object to in Mrs Lester's attitude.

"Do you know," she said, changing the conversation, "I had to pay for the hire of my kimono. I hadn't expected to have to pay after giving my services free, and making so many things for the bazaar. But it all goes to a good cause, I suppose."

Caroline had rather regretted that none of the other three girls had been present at the bazaar in the afternoon, to see how rapidly her tea-cosies had sold; but each of the three had had a different excuse for not coming. Isobel's absence, of course, was a foregone conclusion—she would have loved to go, but could not on account of Miss Crabingway's instructions.

Pamela, as we know, hated bazaars. "Don't ask me to come, Caroline," she had said kindly. "But will you take this donation for 'the cause' and put it in one of the boxes or whatever they have to collect the money in."

Caroline had had hopes that Beryl, at any rate, would not like to refuse to come. But lack of money to spend made Beryl desperate, and, although she was quite resolved in her own mind not to go, she half promised Caroline she would go, if she felt up to it. She even made a feint of preparing to go. Then a sudden imaginary attack of neuralgia made it impossible, and she sent word by Pamela to tell Caroline not to wait, and went and lay down in her bedroom and pulled down the blind. There in her cool and darkened room she listened to Caroline departing, and felt very much ashamed of herself for the story she had made up about neuralgia.

"But I couldn't explain that I had no money—and why," she made excuses to herself. "Oh, it isn't fair!"

About a week after the bazaar Isobel went over to Inchmoor alone one day to Madame Clarence's, a bad toothache compelling Caroline to miss a lesson for the first time. When her dancing-lesson was over Isobel did a little shopping, and then went and had tea in a smart and popular confectioner's, where she could watch all the fashion of the town go by from her seat near the window. Finding that she had missed her usual train back to Barrowfield and that there was a long wait before the next train, she finished her tea leisurely and then started out to walk back home.

She had got about half-way back when a thunderstorm broke suddenly. And there was Isobel in a light cotton dress, and a hat that would be 'absolutely ruined' if it got wet, in the middle of a country lane—a couple of miles from anywhere. She had not paid much attention to the warning clouds overhead, and when the first growl of thunder was heard she looked up startled and hastened her footsteps.

A few minutes later the rain started—great slow thunder-spots at first, and then it came down in torrents. Isobel, casting her eyes hastily around for some place of shelter, saw on the hill-top the ruined windmill. She made for this, and dashed in wet and gasping, and found that although the wind and rain lashed in through the many holes in the ruin, yet it afforded a considerable amount of protection if she chose the right corner to stand in. It was fortunate that she did not remember how Caroline, in spite of her toothache, had come out to the front door to advise her to take an umbrella with her, or she would have felt even more out of temper with the world than she did.

The corner she was crouching in was partly hidden from the doorway by a couple of thick beams of wood which were leaning, like props, from the walls to the ground. The beams and a pile of dust and bricks formed a partial screen, but not sufficient to hide her white frock, if anyone had been present in that deserted spot.

Isobel had been there about five minutes, and the storm showed no signs of abating, when she heard voices and hurrying feet, and the next instant two people dashed in at the doorway.

"Here you are, mother, stand this side—and hold the rug round you this way—it'll protect us a bit," said a deep voice.

"It really *is* most annoying—the car breaking down like that," said a woman's voice. "Don't go outside, Harry.... Oh, mind!" She gave a little shriek at a flash of lightning.

It was not the lightning nor the crash of thunder that followed that made Isobel's heart thump so madly. The two new-comers—who had not caught sight of her yet, as they were standing with their backs to her—were no others than Lady Prior and her son!

Whatever should she do, thought poor Isobel. She was caught in a trap. If they turned and saw her, as they undoubtedly would do sooner or later, they would probably speak—and then what was she to do? Of course they wouldn't know who she was. Surely Miss Crabingway wouldn't mean her not to speak, under the circumstances. It was so perfectly silly! ... But old ladies were queer creatures sometimes. And only a few weeks more—and then the fifty pounds was hers, and she could do what she liked. Isobel did not want to lose the money just by making some stupid little mistake a week or so before it was due. She thought of her Wishing Well wish.... Of course, she could explain just how this meeting came about, to Miss Crabingway—but would Miss Crabingway understand?—or was she hoping that most of the girls would break one or other of the rules, and so lose the money?

All this flashed through Isobel's mind during the few minutes she waited for the two by the doorway to turn round and discover her. How she wished—

wished most fervently—that they would *not* turn round. For, besides the chief reason, Isobel felt she did not wish them to see her because she must look such 'a sight'—dripping wet, and crumpled, and blown about, and her hat flopping limply.

She gathered from the disjointed conversation that was going on that Lady Prior and her son had been driving home in the motor when the car had broken down in one of the by-lanes about a hundred yards from the mill. The storm had come on while the son was trying to mend matters, and Lady Prior being rather nervous of lightning had been unwilling to stay in the car covered with rugs, and had insisted on getting under a roof of some sort where she felt more protected. She had also insisted on Harry coming with her, and so, covering the motor over, they had brought a rug and taken shelter inside the windmill. Although Harry had thought that they would be just as safe if they had remained in the car, Lady Prior thought otherwise. And so here they were.

Isobel glanced round about to see if there were any possible way of escape; but there appeared to be none. "Now what shall I do when they turn round?" she kept asking herself. Had Beryl been in the same predicament as Isobel all sorts of wild ideas would have been rushing through her brain. Beryl would have thought of things like this: Should she pretend she was a foreigner, and could not understand English? Or, better still, should she pretend she was deaf and dumb? Should she pretend to have fainted—and so escape from having to speak; but this might have had awkward consequences if they insisted on taking her home or to a doctor. Should she pretend to go mad, and tear past them and out of the door?

But these sorts of ideas did not occur to Isobel, who was not used to practising deceptions as Beryl was. What Isobel did do was, after all, the most natural thing. When Lady Prior and Harry turned and caught sight of her, and Lady Prior gave a little shriek (because the lightning had unnerved her), and then broke into exclamations and questions, Isobel, quite unable to control herself, began to cry, her face buried in her hands. ("And now, I simply can't let them see my face," she thought to herself. "My nose always goes so red when I cry.... I must look such an awful fright.... I must keep my face hidden somehow.")

She became aware that Lady Prior was speaking to her in a slightly condescending voice, forbidding her to cry, and telling her not be alarmed at the lightning.

"These country creatures are sometimes so frightfully hysterical during thunderstorms," Isobel heard Lady Prior remark in an undertone to her son. "I suppose she's a girl from one of the villages around here.... There, there, my good girl, don't cry like that—the storm's almost over now."

Lady Prior asked her a few more questions—Where did she come from?

Had she far to go home? But receiving no reply she turned to her son, smiled faintly, and shrugged her shoulders.

Isobel sobbed on. Her feelings beggar description. To be talked to in such a tone by Lady Prior! To be mistaken for a dowdy, hysterical village girl by Lady Prior! (But, of course, her wet clothes and flopping hat and streaky hair must look so positively awful that no wonder Lady Prior could not tell what she was nor what she looked like.) Nevertheless, it was the last drop in Isobel's cup of humiliation. Not for anything on earth would she let them see her face now!

Stealthily she watched for her opportunity. Lady Prior and her son had moved away from the door because the rain was lashing in too furiously, and their backs were turned to her again. She edged quietly round the wall, climbed swiftly over the pile of bricks and dust, and made a sudden dash for the door.

Lady Prior gave another little shriek and clutched hold of Harry's arm.

Isobel's action had been so sudden and unexpected that before anyone could stop her she had gained the door and was rushing blindly down the hill in the pouring rain.

Whether Harry was sent after her she did not know. Probably not, as it was still raining, and Lady Prior would think the girl was hysterical beyond control and that it was the best thing to let her run home as quickly as possible.

Isobel reached home just as the storm was over. Do what she would to avoid seeing the other girls she could not escape them. They all three came out into the hall to exclaim over her drenched state and offer their help, but she kept her head down as much as possible so that they should not see she had been crying, and hurried off to her room to change her clothes at once.

She would not look in the glass until she was warm and dry again. She felt she could not stand this last blow to her self-respect. When she did see her reflection she was almost her old self again, and the feeling of humiliation was considerably lightened. She began to feel somewhat virtuous for not breaking Miss Crabingway's rule, and pleased with herself for having got out of the predicament without Lady Prior and Harry suspecting her identity.

CHAPTER XVI

PAMELA'S WISH COMES TRUE

It would be pleasant to be able to record, now that the visit to Chequertrees

draws to a close, that the four girls had made considerable progress in the work that they had set themselves to do. But this was not quite the case.

Caroline had certainly done an immense amount of needlework, but she had learnt no dressmaking nor 'cutting out'; her needlework was simply a repetition of work she could already do. And the dancing-lessons she had attended had scarcely improved her ability, or rather inability, for dancing; but they were good exercise for her, and had improved her health. It seemed to Caroline as if she would never be able to learn some of the dances Madame Clarence taught, not even if she attended the Academy for twenty years; she did not know why—simply, she could not grasp them. Sometimes it seemed to Caroline as if her feet were in league against her; her right foot would come forward and point the toe when it ought to have remained stationary and let the left foot point the toe; and her left foot would raise itself up while the right foot gave a hop, just when they both ought to have been gliding gracefully along the polished floor.... But in spite of these annoyances Caroline kept doggedly on with the lessons, and the improvement in her health was more than compensation for her lack of success as a dancer.

Beryl had advanced a great deal in her musical studies. She had had time and opportunity to practise and study her theory; time and opportunity had never been so liberally offered to her before, and now that they were offered she seized them eagerly—and made the most of them. She had even tried to compose a few pieces—a waltz, and a march, and a melody in E flat, a haunting melody which always made her feel 'exaltingly sad' whenever she played it. Beryl thought privately that it was a beautiful tune, but Isobel, who heard it through the door one day, told Caroline that she thought it ought to be called 'Green Apples,' because the treble "sounded like the face one pulls on tasting something sharp and sour." Caroline was puzzled, and pondered over this for a long time, and then went to listen outside the door herself. She heard the tune, and liked it—liked it so much that she went in and asked Beryl to play it again, much to Beryl's confusion and delight. After that it became a regular institution; Caroline would take her needlework into the drawing-room and sit and listen whenever Beryl started to play her melody in E flat. For some reason or other this particular tune appealed to Caroline; it made her feel pleasantly melancholy, and she enjoyed the feeling, and would sit sewing and heaving long sighs at intervals. If Isobel were anywhere within hearing on these occasions she was rendered nearly helpless with stifled laughter. "There's poor old Caroline going in to have some more 'Green Apples,'" she would giggle, and as the tune proceeded would stuff her handkerchief in her mouth and fly up to her room and shut herself in. Although this was only an early attempt at composing, it marked a chapter in Beryl's musical career, and as she advanced her compositions became more numerous and were

better finished.

Isobel, who had not taken the question of work seriously, had nevertheless made good progress in her dancing. Naturally a graceful dancer, she had rapidly picked up the new dances at Madame Clarence's, and was now one of Madame's 'show pupils'—to the mutual satisfaction of both of them. It may have been noticed that up to the present time no mention has been made of Isobel taking any photographs with the camera she talked of buying; this was because she did not buy a camera until a fortnight before her stay at Barrowfield came to an end; and then she went and bought one with a definite purpose in view—the purpose of giving a gift of some photographs to Miss Crabingway on her return.

Pamela, though she had given most of her spare time to her sketching, had got through a good deal of reading as well, but not as much as she had meant to. The best of her sketches she intended to take home with her in order to show Michael what she had been doing, and what sort of places she had been seeing, and what she had learnt from Elizabeth Bagg.

There was one thing that all four girls had managed to do, and that was to keep on good terms with each other with rarely an open disagreement. "It'll be so much more comfortable for us all if we can manage to put up with each other—and, after all, it is only for a short time, not for life," Pamela had remarked on one occasion. And so this sensible attitude was adopted by all of them. Whenever the smoothly running wheels of the household got stuck, as they were bound to occasionally, a little lubricating oil from Martha or Ellen, or one or other of the girls, soon set them running easily again. The stay at Chequertrees and the contact of the various temperaments was bound to leave some impression on each of the girls afterward; it was not to be expected that it could radically change them, except in small ways. They had all more or less enjoyed their visit, and it had done them all good, in more ways than one. Martha and Ellen owned to each other in the kitchen one evening that they would certainly miss the young life about the place when the girls had gone.

About a fortnight before the six months came to an end the girls were sitting in the garden one afternoon having tea under the mulberry tree at the end of the lawn, when Beryl made a suggestion.

"I was just wondering," she began hesitatingly, "whether we couldn't do something for Miss Crabingway, as a sort of—well, to show we've had a nice time here in her house."

"What sort of thing?" asked Caroline, her mind running at once to gifts of hand-made tea-cosies and cushions.

"A jolly good idea, Beryl," said Pamela. "It would be nice to show her we'd appreciated the stay here. I know that I, for one, have had a good time. What could we do, now, for Miss Crabingway?"

"When you say 'do something,' do you mean club together and buy her a present?—or do you suggest we decorate the house with evergreens and hang WELCOME HOME in white cotton-wool letters on a red flannel background?" said Isobel, laughing. "Or does 'do something' mean getting up an entertainment for her pleasure, in which case you can put me down for a skirt dance—I've learnt a heavenly new step at Madame Clarence's—you'll see it when you come to Madame's reception next week."

"I suppose you end the lessons the week after next?" said Pamela.

"Yes, last time on Tuesday week," replied Isobel. "Of course it's very unusual to hold dancing-classes all through the summer, as Madame does, but some of the pupils are awfully keen—and she finds that it pays, I suppose. But it's the last time I shall be there—Tuesday week."

"Oh, don't let us talk about *last* and *end*," said Beryl. "I wish it needn't end—our stay here."

"Do you really?" said Isobel. "Oh, it hasn't been a bad time on the whole, but I shan't be sorry to get back to town, and the shops and theatres, and, of course, mater and all the rest of it."

"I shan't mind being home again, though I've had a pleasant stay here," remarked Caroline. "I'm sure Pamela is longing to be among her people again."

"Oh, I am," said Pamela fervently. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to seeing them. I've had an awfully jolly time here, though.... And that brings us back to Beryl's suggestion—what can we do for Miss Crabingway? ... I don't know what you all think about it, but I should suggest that we each give her something original—give her something she couldn't buy in a shop in the ordinary way."

"Like—what?" asked Isobel.

"Well, for instance, Caroline could give her a piece of her hand-embroidered needlework."

"I wish we had thought of this earlier," observed Caroline, "I could have been working at something, in odd moments, all these weeks."

"You've still got a whole fortnight left, dear child," said Isobel. "But what can *I* do for Miss Crabingway? Suggest something, somebody, please! I can't do embroidery, like Caroline; nor draw pictures, like Pamela; nor compose music, like Beryl.... By the way, Beryl, you ought to compose a waltz, and call it 'The Emily Valse,' and dedicate it to Miss Emily Crabingway, you know. She would be *charmed*, I'm sure."

Beryl flushed quickly, not because she resented Isobel's joke, but because some such idea as Isobel suggested had flitted for a moment through her mind (barring the title of the composition).

"And I'll invent a dance which shall be called 'The Crabingway Glide,' and

I'll dance it to your music. There! What do you think of that for an idea?" Isobel laughed.

"Very good indeed," said Pamela.

And then the four girls began to laugh at each other, and with each other, and make all sorts of wild and facetious suggestions, until Martha came to the kitchen window and looked out, wondering what all the laughter was about. But, in spite of all the joking about it, the idea was seriously considered, and arrangements made for each to do her best to give Miss Crabingway something of her own work in appreciation of the visit to Chequertrees.

It was on this occasion that Isobel finally decided to buy her camera without delay and get some really interesting snap-shots of the girls and the house, and have the best photographs enlarged and framed for Miss Crabingway.

"While we're on the subject," said Pamela, "I should like to give something or other to Martha and Ellen, wouldn't you? They've looked after us awfully well—what can we do for them, I wonder?"

They discussed presents for Martha and Ellen, and decided each to make or buy something suitable within the next fortnight.

Pamela went round to see the Baggs after tea. She knew that it was one of the days Elizabeth went over to Inchmoor and that she would not be back home again until seven o'clock, because it was the evening she stayed later to do her housekeeping shopping. But Pamela did not want to see Elizabeth herself. She wanted to see her firelight picture, which she knew was just finished.

The eldest little Bagg girl was setting the table for her father's tea when Pamela arrived at 'Alice Maud Villa.'

"I'm just going up to Elizabeth's room for something," said Pamela, after she had helped to lay the table. Tom Bagg was not in yet, but expected in every minute.

Upstairs in the studio Pamela found Elizabeth's picture—finished. She stood before it for some minutes, regarding it earnestly.

"Yes, it's the best thing she's ever done," she said to herself. "I'm sure it is."

To Pamela's eyes the likenesses were excellent; Tom Bagg, with his ruddy, genial face, sitting in his big arm-chair by the fire, chuckling, and pointing with the stem of his pipe at his absorbed audience of children, a habit of his when emphasizing any particular point in the story. The expressions on the children's faces were delightful. Pamela laughed softly to herself as she looked at them.

Then she went to the door, opened it, and listened. Tom Bagg had just come in, and was inquiring when his tea would be ready.

"I'll wait till he's had it," thought Pamela. "He'll be in an extra good mood then."

She went downstairs and chatted with him while he had his tea, and did her

best to put him in as pleasant a mood as possible. She laughed at his jokes longer than they deserved, and encouraged him to talk; he was always happy when talking; and she kept an eye on the children so that they did nothing to annoy him. Frequently she would glance up at the clock, anxious to assure herself that Elizabeth was not due home yet.

At length, when Tom Bagg had finished his tea and had got out his pipe and tobacco pouch, she felt that her opportunity had arrived. She rose, and with rapidly beating heart went upstairs to the studio and fetched the firelight picture down. Without a word she placed it on a chair before the old cabman, who watched her movements with curious surprise. The little Baggs pressed forward and clustered round the picture, gazing in astonishment. For a second or two there was dead silence in the room.

"It's Daddy," said one of the children.

"An' us!" cried another shrilly.

"Your sister painted it," said Pamela to Tom Bagg.

Then they all began to talk at once—all, that is, except old Tom Bagg. Throughout the noisy interlude that followed he remained silent, staring at the picture. Pamela watched his face anxiously.

Presently he scratched the bald spot on the top of his head, and said quietly:

"Well, I'm blowed!"

He had never seen any of Elizabeth's portrait studies before, and was filled with astonishment.

"But it's like me!" he said in surprise, as if that were the last thing to be expected.

"Of course it is," replied Pamela. "It's meant to be." Then she went on to explain how Elizabeth had sat and watched him and the children and then gone away and painted the picture up in her own room. She was longing to talk about Elizabeth's work with all the enthusiasm she felt for it, but she purposely kept her voice as quiet as she could, because she guessed it would be wiser and more effective to let Tom Bagg think he had discovered for himself how clever his sister really was.

Which is precisely what Tom Bagg came to think he had done. He was much taken by his own portrait.

"It's not a bad bit of work, eh?" he asked Pamela.

"It's a decidedly good bit of work—it's splendid," she replied.

The more Tom Bagg looked at the picture the more pleased he became with it.

"No," he said, "it's not at all a bad bit of work."

He stood with his head a little on one side regarding the picture.

And then the front-door latch clicked and Elizabeth Bagg stepped in. She

caught sight of the picture immediately, and looked round the room astonished, and annoyed.

"Oh, please forgive me," said Pamela, moving toward her. "I—I simply couldn't help bringing it down..."

"Lizzie," said Tom Bagg, who felt wholeheartedly generous once he was convinced of anything, "this is not at all a bad bit of work. Why didn't you tell me you could paint likenesses?"

He was evidently greatly struck with the painting, and seemed to admire it so genuinely, that any annoyance Elizabeth may have felt faded immediately, and she laughed a little nervously and said she was glad he liked it.

When Pamela had decided to bring the picture down to show to Tom Bagg she had not expected her action to do more than make Tom Bagg realize the talent of his sister, and so make it easier for her to have more time for her painting. Tom Bagg certainly did realize his sister's talent at last; but the matter did not end there; he became so pleased with the picture that the following evening he carried it (without Elizabeth's permission) down to the 'Blue Boar,' where he proudly displayed it to his bosom friends, and any strangers who happened to drop in while he was there, and was much elated by the unanimous praise it received.

Whether you believe the Wishing Well had anything to do with the sequel depends on whether you believe in Wishing Wells or not. Pamela undoubtedly puts it down to the Wishing Well. She had wished that Elizabeth Bagg's work would gain recognition. And it did. It happened that a Mr Alfred Knowles, an influential art connoisseur from London, came into the 'Blue Boar' that evening just when Tom Bagg was showing the picture to a group of men in the bar-parlour. Mr Knowles listened with great interest to Tom Bagg's explanations and remarks, and getting into conversation with the old cabman, questioned him closely about his sister's work. An introduction to Elizabeth Bagg followed, and Mr Knowles was so delighted with her pictures that he purchased several and took them back to town with him; he would have liked to buy the firelight picture, but Tom Bagg seemed so anxious to keep it that Elizabeth decided not to part with it, but promised Mr Knowles that she would have a reproduction made for him as quickly as possible. And so the original picture of Tom Bagg telling stories to his children was hung up over the mantel-piece in the living-room of the little cottage in Long Lane.

Pamela was delighted by the turn events had taken. Had she been able to see into Elizabeth's future she would have been more delighted still. For Elizabeth's pictures were to be seen and admired by Mr Knowles' artistic friends, and she was to get commissions from them for numerous paintings, so that as time went on she was obliged to give up her classes at Inchmoor in order to give all

her spare time to her painting at home. And with the money she earned Elizabeth was eventually able to pay for some one to come and do the housework for her brother, and washing and mending, and to help look after the children. For, though Elizabeth achieved in time a small amount of fame, it never altered her decision to stay and look after her brother and his children.

"I couldn't be happy if I left them now," she would say, when tempted with the thought of that wonderful room in London. Instead, she rented a room in Barrowfield, which she turned into a studio, and divided her days between the studio and her brother's house.

As for Tom Bagg, he was bewildered yet gratified with the state of affairs; his respect for Elizabeth increased by leaps and bounds as he saw how highly valued her work became. Gradually he came to wonder if he and the children were a drag on Elizabeth's career, and once he offered her her freedom, and was deeply touched by her decision to stay with him...

And there was to come a day in the future when Pamela and Michael and Elizabeth Bagg were to pay a visit to the Royal Academy to see Elizabeth's latest picture hung...

But all this was to happen some years after Pamela's first visit to Barrowfield was over. Up to the present time Elizabeth's pictures had just been bought by Mr Knowles—which was sufficient for Pamela to be able to announce to three interested girls at Chequertrees that her Wishing Well wish had come true.

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH OLD SILAS LAUGHS AND ISOBEL DANCES

Madame Clarence's reception took place a week before the girls' visit to Chequertrees came to an end. As one of Madame's 'show' pupils Isobel was to do a special dance by herself on this occasion; she had been looking forward to this, and had bought a special dress for the dance, made of white silk. She had practised the steps and movements of the dance over and over again before a long mirror in her bedroom, until she could do the dance to her complete satisfaction. Madame was enthusiastic over it, and told Isobel privately that she thought she would be the success of the evening—which pleased Isobel greatly, and made her determine that she would do her best to make Madame's words come true.

In her white silk frock, her pretty fluffy hair dressed becomingly and tied

with a soft blue ribbon, she looked very dainty and graceful as she ran down the stairs to the dining-room for Pamela and Beryl to inspect her before she put her cloak on.

Caroline, who, of course, was to dance at Madame's reception also (but not by herself), was "not quite ready yet," she called out to Isobel as the latter passed the bedroom door on her way down. Caroline was to wear a white frock too; but white did not suit Caroline's complexion, and the style of her dress rather emphasized her heavy build and plump arms. However, as Caroline surveyed herself in the mirror she was not so concerned about her frock or complexion as she was with the intricacies of one of the dances she was to take part in that evening. She felt sure she would never remember a certain twist at one point, and a bow, and a turn at another, and she felt very glad that she was not going to dance alone, like Isobel, but only with a crowd of other girls.

Pamela, Beryl, Martha, and Ellen had been invited by Isobel and Caroline to come as their guests to the reception. Each pupil of Madame's could bring two friends with them, and Isobel claiming Pamela and Beryl for her two, Caroline suddenly had the nice idea of inviting Martha and Ellen.

It was arranged that Isobel and Caroline were to go on ahead of their guests, as Madame had expressed a wish that all her pupils would arrive at least half an hour before the visitors were expected, so that everything and every one would be ready to start promptly to time. It was just beginning to get dusk when the two girls were actually ready and waiting for Tom Bagg's cab to arrive so that they could start off. Pamela, Beryl, Martha, and Ellen were to follow on to Inchmoor by the seven o'clock train.

The evening was very warm, and as Tom Bagg drove up to the gate, Isobel, suddenly declaring that she was too hot to put on her cloak, decided to carry it over her arm and wrap it round her in the cab if she felt chilly. Caroline did not care how hot she felt; she put on her cloak and buttoned it up to the neck, telling Isobel she thought she was foolish and that she might not only catch a cold but would get her dress soiled in brushing against the cab door, and so on. But Isobel laughed and asked Caroline if she was going to take her goloshes and umbrella in case it rained between the front door and the cab at the gate. And so, with Pamela and Beryl wishing them both good luck, Isobel and Caroline passed out of the front door and down the garden.

And then a catastrophe happened.

Isobel, who was some way in front of Caroline, was passing a low thick bush half-way along the path to the gate, and had turned to make some laughing remark, and wave her hand to Pamela at the front door, when suddenly a pailful of garden rubbish—mostly weeds with black, wet soil clinging to their roots—came shooting over the bush, and descended in a shower all over Isobel and her

pretty white silk frock.



A PAILFUL OF GARDEN RUBBISH DESCENDED IN A SHOWER

A PAILFUL OF GARDEN RUBBISH DESCENDED IN A SHOWER

Isobel gave a scream, ran a few steps, and then stood stock-still, and gazed down at her frock and the coat on her arm.

"Oh, it's spoilt—it's absolutely spoilt!" she gasped, whipping out her handkerchief and trying in vain to rub off the dirty, smeary marks on her sleeves and skirt. "Oh, Pamela, whatever shall I do? ... But who *did* it? Who *did* it?" she cried, lifting her head angrily, and she made a dart round the side of the bush.

But there was no one immediately on the other side. About a dozen yards off, with his back to her, digging methodically away at one of the flowerbeds was old Silas Sluff.

"Oh!" cried Isobel. "It was you, then, was it? How—how dare— Oh, you perfectly horrible creature!"

Silas, being deaf, took no notice, and so she ran forward, stepping recklessly on his flowerbeds, and confronted him, her eyes blazing with anger.

By this time the others had come on the scene. Pamela, Beryl, followed by the dumbfounded Caroline, and presently Martha and Ellen, came running to learn what had happened and what had caused the delay. Poor Isobel certainly looked a woebegone sight, with great smears down her dress and on one cheek, and soil and weeds in her hair. Who would have believed that the soil would have been so sticky and wet—unless old Silas had recently been watering the garden, which he didn't appear to have been doing.

"Look what you've done!" cried Isobel excitedly, pointing to her dress; but as Silas did not look up, but still went on digging, she suddenly seized his spade, jerked it out of his hands, and flung it down on the ground. "Look what you've done!" she repeated.

Old Silas straightened his bent back and looked at the dress in silence.

"You'll have to pay for this, my man!" Isobel raised her voice and spoke loudly and distinctly.

"Eh?" said old Silas, whose deafness appeared to be worse than usual today. Then he added, "Who will?"

"You," cried Isobel. "You'll have to pay for a new dress in place of this one you've spoilt."

Here Pamela joined in. After a great deal of difficulty, for the old gardener seemed extraordinarily deaf and stupid, he was made to understand that he was being accused of throwing a pailful of rubbish over Isobel.

"And you did it *purposely*," added Isobel.

"Oh, Isobel, wait a minute," said Pamela. "Perhaps he didn't know you were passing—perhaps he didn't hear you."

Old Silas was apparently not so deaf after all, for he caught this remark, and looking at Isobel's dress and seeing that his handiwork was even better than he had expected it to be, he decided in his own mind to retire now from this

awkward scene in the manner most to his advantage; after all, he thought, there were four, five, six of them as witnesses against him here, and if they complained to Miss Crabingway he might be dismissed—which would not suit him at all.

"'Ere," he said at length, "what's that you sez I done? Eh? Well, I *did* throw a pail of rubbidge over the 'edge jus' now—I'm not a-goin' to say as 'ow I didn't—but I thrown it on to the rubbidge 'eap.... Where I alwus throw it—all on to the path in a 'eap and then sweep it up afterwuds.... I never 'eard no one comin' along the path—I'm that 'ard of 'earing, yer know.... I never 'eard no one..."

"But it's not usual for you to throw the rubbish over like that without looking, is it?" asked Pamela.

But Silas stoutly maintained that it was, though nobody in the little group around him had seen him do such a thing before to-day. Ellen, in the background, squeezed Martha's arm and winked, whispering in her ear,

"Of *course* he done it for the purpose. I told you he'd have his revenge on Miss Isobel for saucing him in the garden when she first came here, didn't I now?"

Meanwhile Silas stubbornly held to his point that he thought he was throwing the weeds on the rubbish heap, and that he had not heard Isobel coming past.

"Well, Isobel," said Pamela, "it won't do any good to prolong this argument—and time's flying past. Let's hurry in and see what we can do to the dress—or you must wear one of mine. And, Beryl, will you explain to Tom Bagg and ask him in to wait for twenty minutes—we mustn't be longer than that." Then she turned to Silas. "I think," she said, "that at any rate you might apologize——"

"Apologize! What good will that do! I don't want an apology from *him*," cried Isobel. "I'm too disgusted with him—besides, I *know* he did it purposely. He's just telling lies, because he is frightened now at what he's done.... But if the dress is ruined beyond repair he shall pay for it—I don't care what he says.... I'll make him pay, if—if I have to go to law about it." And without waiting for anything further Isobel turned on her heel and marched away into the house, followed by Pamela, who was secretly longing to laugh at old Silas's expression and Isobel's theatrical outburst. In a few moments the group round Silas dispersed.

Silas stood for a while scratching the top of his head and looking at the ground where Isobel had stood, then he picked up his spade and resumed his digging.

Presently he began to chuckle. "I said I'd learn 'er," he told himself. "An' I *did* learn 'er. Nice and slimy and wet them weeds were—an', after all, I *did* only throw 'em on a rubbidge 'eap. That's what she is."

Why old Silas had not taken his revenge on Isobel before this it is impossible to say. He had not thought out any clear plan for a long time, but had waited for an idea, and when he had got one he had turned it over in his mind with relish

for some time, and then begun to look around for an opportunity—and, at length, to-day he had found one.

While Tom Bagg waited in the hall, and Caroline wandered about asking if she could be of any use, Pamela and Beryl, finding that Isobel's dress could not be remedied unless it was thoroughly washed and ironed, quickly got out a white muslin frock of Pamela's and set to work to make it fit Isobel. Pamela was more Isobel's build than either of the other two girls, and so her dress was not such a bad fit, and with the aid of a needle and cotton, and some safety pins and a pair of scissors, it soon began to look presentable on Isobel. Of course it did not look as pretty on Isobel as her own white silk had done—but it was fortunate that Pamela had even a white muslin frock ready to lend Isobel in this emergency. Martha and Ellen lent a hand, hurrying to and fro, looking for pins and scissors, and helping Isobel to brush the soil out of her hair and re-do it. For although they all knew that Isobel's conduct toward old Silas had been very rude and trying, to say the least of it, yet they all felt sorry for her that he had chosen just this occasion to punish her for her treatment of him so many months ago.

There was no time to talk much—they all worked hard, and within half an hour Isobel and Caroline were safely packed away inside Tom Bagg's cab and were jogging briskly along the road to Inchmoor.

Of course Pamela, Beryl, Martha, and Ellen had missed the seven o'clock train, and when they arrived at the Dancing Academy, and were shown into the big dancing-hall, a great number of people were already assembled, and the first part of the programme had begun. Madame, who had received all her guests in the doorway and had shaken hands with each one, had now disappeared behind the door at the back of the raised platform at the end of the hall. The four late arrivals managed to squeeze through the crowd that filled the lower half of the hall, and at length found seats where they could obtain a good view of the evening's proceedings.

A glance round the hall conveyed the impression that Madame's receptions must be very popular affairs; there was scarcely a vacant seat to be seen. Most of the audience were relatives of the pupils or friends, or prospective pupils, but there were a number of people who were outsiders—people who had received a pressing and urgent invitation from Madame at the last minute; for always before her receptions Madame would be suddenly seized with an unreasonable fear that the hall would be empty of onlookers, or only half filled, and so she would send out a score or so of these pressing and flattering invitations at random, and in a frantic hurry, a couple of days before the reception took place. And generally a few of these last-minute visitors would turn up.

The upper half of the hall, including the raised platform at the end, was reserved for the dancers, the baby-grand piano being well concealed by bamboo

fern-stands and pots of flowering shrubs, so that the music arose, apparently, from a bank of greenery and flowers. Prettily shaded lights were suspended at intervals from the ceiling.

Pamela and Beryl gathered from the conversation going on around them that they had missed Madame's opening speech and the first dance, and now the second dance was just about to start. A tall, thin lady in a black evening dress, with lace frills at her elbows, and wearing pince-nez and a rather bored expression, appeared from the door at the back of the platform, and descending behind the ferns and bamboo stands, began to play a lively barn-dance on the piano. It was a good piano, all except one note in the bass which was out of tune, and made a curious burring noise whenever it was played on; and this particular note seemed to recur again and again in the barn-dance, so that Beryl always associated the music of that evening with this particular bass note, and could hear it, in her head, whenever Madame's name was mentioned.

Twelve girls all dressed in white, and twelve youths in regulation evening-dress, took part in the barn-dance, which was enthusiastically applauded by the audience. This was followed by a graceful, old-fashioned minuet and several solo dances, each of which Martha said was nicer than the one before. But of all the dances, there were just three that the onlookers from Chequertrees remembered best. The first was Isobel's dance, the second a flower-dance in which Caroline took part, and the third a weird dance done by Madame Clarence herself.

Isobel's dance was a great success, as Madame had prophesied. Almost up to the moment when she first appeared on the platform Isobel had been feeling out of humour and disappointed on account of her white silk dress; but directly she started to dance she forgot all her troubles, and, smiling happily, she floated lightly across the platform, swaying, turning, tapping with her small white shoes, and daintily holding the skirt of Pamela's white muslin frock. It was sheer pleasure to watch Isobel's graceful movements, and she seemed to be enjoying the dance so thoroughly, that every one else felt they were enjoying it too. Could old Silas have seen her smiling light-heartedly as she danced across the hall he would never have recognized her as the same girl who had stood before him a few hours previously, savagely angry. Pamela and Beryl were astonished at the change in Isobel; they had not expected her to be able to throw her annoyance off so completely.

At the end of the dance a storm of applause broke out, and Isobel was encored again and again. Back she came, blushing and smiling and bowing—a transformed Isobel, her eyes bright with excitement. The success of the evening! That's what she had hoped to be—and that was what she was. As she bowed her acknowledgments after her encore dance, her smiling gaze, wandering round the faces of the audience, lighted on the faces of two girls, whom she recognized as

Lady Prior's daughters; they were applauding her enthusiastically, Isobel saw to her delight.

On the other side of the platform door Caroline waited, listening to the applause that was greeting Isobel, and she couldn't help thinking that it was rather a shame that no applause like this was ever given to the most choice piece of needlework imaginable. She tried to conjure up visions of rapturously applauding audiences encoring an embroidered tea-cosy, but it was impossible to picture it, and she sighed heavily. "And yet the tea-cosy is much more useful than a dance," she thought. Isobel might have argued that a dance, in giving a hundred people a few minutes' genuine pleasure and happiness was of more use than a tea-cosy, but Caroline would never have agreed with her. Thinking of the many hours she had sat over her needlework, and the delicate stitchery she had done, for which she had received nothing more than an occasional word of praise, Caroline felt all at once aggrieved, realizing the unfairness of things in general. She couldn't remember feeling like this before, and marvelled at herself. Why had she got this sudden desire for praise? Perhaps it was the knowledge that the dance in which she was to appear came next on the programme, and she knew that she was no good at dancing. She wondered why Madame had insisted on her taking part in this dance; Madame liked every one of her pupils to appear on the occasions when she gave a reception, providing, of course, that they were passable dancers. She thought Caroline a passable dancer, and so she was until she forgot her steps. And Caroline felt convinced she was going to forget them on this occasion; she wished she had, on the present occasion, that sense of capability she would have felt if she had been going on the platform with a needle and thread in her hand.

Caroline felt so sure she would forget a certain part of the flower-dance that, of course, she did forget it. With twenty other girls, each carrying a trail of artificial roses, she danced on to the platform and down the upper part of the hall. All went well for a time. Every time she danced past the place where Martha was sitting she was conscious that Martha nodded and beamed encouragingly at her, and felt somewhat cheered by this attention on Martha's part. And then, when the critical part of the dance arrived—whether it was that Caroline was giddy with whirling round and round, or whether it was because she had thought to herself, "Now, this is where I shall go wrong," will never be known—but after a brief but vivid impression that she was dancing up the side of the wall, and that the audience were spinning round and round her like a gigantic top, Caroline found herself alone in the middle of the hall, with her feet tangled in a trail of artificial roses and her hair tumbling about her face.

The audience was clapping and laughing. Caroline was overcome with confusion and, flushing painfully, tried to disentangle herself from the roses. The

other girls were grouped together in a final tableau at the other end of the hall, beside the platform. They were all tittering with laughter too. Caroline made a desperate effort, and, disentangling herself, dashed across to them and tried to obscure herself among the twenty. And in another minute the dance was over and they were all 'behind the scenes' again.

Madame received her with honeyed words, but the tone of her voice was acid. She had thought that Caroline's dancing would pass at least unnoticed, and now it had been noticed in a very unenviable way.

Poor Caroline! She felt both ashamed and sorry for herself. "I knew I should never remember that part," was all she could say—and thereafter remained quiet and sulky, brooding over the 'ridiculous sketch' she must have looked before all that laughing audience. "I never did like dancing," she said to herself later, "and now I hate it."

Fortunately Madame Clarence's own dance followed soon after Caroline's blunder, and the impression made by Madame was such as to sweep everything else into the background for the time being.

It certainly was a remarkable dance, and one that Madame had invented herself. Madame was dressed in a startling black frock embroidered with gold, and wore yellow earrings and a long chain of yellow beads, and bright yellow shoes and stockings. Madame's expressive hands played a great part in the dance, which, as previously mentioned, was remarkable—far more remarkable than beautiful. It seemed to Ellen, who gazed spellbound, as if Madame must surely end by breaking her neck, or one of her legs, so full of twists and curves was the dance; indeed, at times it was all Ellen could do to keep herself from giving little shrieks or crying 'oo-er' aloud. However, she enjoyed it immensely, and so did the rest of the audience, judging by the applause Madame received and the huge bouquets which suddenly appeared and were handed up to her as she came to bow her thanks, smiling delightedly and kissing her hand to the audience.

During the evening there was an interval in which coffee and cakes were handed round, and everybody became very chatty, and Madame wandered about among her guests conversing and receiving compliments. Ellen seemed to be fascinated by Madame, and followed her movements around the hall admiringly.

Beryl watched the evening's proceedings with sad, preoccupied eyes. She smiled and talked brightly enough when anyone spoke to her, but her face in repose wore an anxious, worried look. During the previous week her moods of depression had been very frequent, and worse than usual, for even her music had been neglected and the piano had been closed and silent. She was enjoying the evening at Madame Clarence's, but she was not by any means at ease. Pamela had noticed this and was a little puzzled. That Beryl was far from anxious for their six months' stay at Chequertrees to come to an end Pamela was aware; and

she did not doubt that Beryl dreaded Miss Crabingway's return, because it meant Enfield and Aunt Laura for Beryl; but she felt that there was something more than the coming parting to account for Beryl's preoccupied manner and avoidance of any confidential talk with her.

Madame Clarence's successful evening coming at length to a close, Madame stood at the door again and shook hands effusively with her guests as they passed out, receiving more compliments, and herself telling every one how "vevy, vevy kind it was of them to come."

During the journey home Caroline was wrapped in gloom, but Isobel was in high good spirits and chatted and laughed excitedly, all thoughts of old Silas having been driven from her head—until the following morning when she returned the muslin dress to Pamela.

Finding, on examination, that her own silk dress was not irretrievably spoiled, but would come up as good as new when washed, Isobel decided to take no further steps to show her displeasure toward Silas.

"He's not worth taking any more bother about," Isobel decided, partly because she really felt that, and partly because she did not know exactly what to do to punish him—beyond reporting him to Miss Crabingway, which might lead to awkward questions about her own conduct, she realized.

And so Silas Sluff heard no more about the rubbish heap.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DOOR IS UNLOCKED

A couple of days before Miss Crabingway was due to return Beryl made an opportunity to speak to Pamela about the money she had borrowed.

"I haven't got it on me at present, Pamela," said Beryl. "But I'll be sure to let you have it back. I'll send it to you by post, without fail. It was awfully good of you.... I have got your address, haven't I? Oh, yes, I wrote it down in my note book."

"That's all right. Don't worry about that—any time will do," said Pamela. "If I could help you in any way—"

But Beryl thanked her and assured her that everything was all right, and hurriedly changed the subject.

Miss Crabingway was expected home on the Friday morning, so the girls

made all their final preparations on the Thursday evening, and Pamela and Beryl and Isobel (Caroline was busy packing) spent an hour after tea in picking flowers and arranging them in every room in the house.

"Why, it's like as if the garden 'as come inside the house," cried Martha, passing through the hall as Pamela was arranging a big bowl of roses on a small table by the front door.

"Aren't they lovely?" said Pamela, burying her nose in them. "And we don't seem to have robbed the garden a bit—there are heaps more.... I always think flowers give one such a welcome, don't you, Martha? ... And these are going to stand on the mat, as it were, and be the first to shake hands with Miss Crabingway to-morrow, to welcome her home."

But, after all, it was not the bowl of roses that welcomed Miss Crabingway home; it was a pot of shaggy yellow chrysanthemums that stood inside the french windows of the drawing-room that night. Pamela did not know this, though, until the following morning, after breakfast.

Pamela noticed, when she put her head inside the kitchen door on her way to breakfast that Martha and Ellen were whispering together in a subdued, excited way, and that they stopped at once on catching sight of her and went hastily on with their work.

"I'm just bringing the coffee in, Miss Pamela," said Ellen.

While Martha took the boiled eggs out of the saucepan with a self-conscious expression on her face, and in her efforts to appear unconcerned dropped one, and it broke on the kitchen floor. In the unnecessary energy she put into the work of clearing it up she was able to hide her embarrassment and regain her composure.

This was not lost on Pamela, who felt that there was a certain atmosphere of mystery in the kitchen—which was entirely foreign to the light, sunny room, with its shining brass and purring kettle, and delicious smell of baking bread.

"Is anything the matter, Martha?" she could not help asking, when calm was restored and the broken egg replaced. "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

Martha and Ellen exchanged quick glances, and then Martha laughed.

"Why, bless my heart, why should there be?" she replied. "Of course there's nothing wrong." And she laughed again.

But Pamela felt vaguely uneasy—why, she did not know. She ate her breakfast thoughtfully, and did not talk half so much as she usually did at breakfast-time. All the girls were more silent than usual, as if the coming events of the day were already casting their shadows over them.

As soon as breakfast was finished Martha appeared suddenly in the dining-room doorway and said,

"I was to ask you all if you would please step up and see Miss Crabingway

now.... She is in her own room....”

The girls looked at each other in astonishment. Miss Crabingway here! In her own room! The locked-up room? When did she arrive? None of them had heard her come.

They turned to Martha with a dozen questions, but Martha only smiled mysteriously and shook her head.

”Miss Crabingway arrived late last night,” she said when there was a pause in the questioning; ”so late that she did not knock at the front door, in case she woke you all up ...”

”Then how—?” Isobel began.

”I heard some one tap on the french windows in the drawing-room, just as I was going to lock up for the night.... It was Miss Crabingway,” said Martha.

”But why—” said Isobel.

Martha moved out of the doorway. ”Miss Crabingway is waiting for you,” she said.

The girls had all risen, and were standing round the table.

”Yes, we’d better go,” said Pamela.

But none of them moved for a moment. They were gradually readjusting their plans to meet the present occasion—their plans for welcoming Miss Crabingway, which were all spoilt now. Instead of being able to catch a glimpse of her before she saw them—being able to watch her enter the garden gate, and come up the path to the front door—here she was in their midst, ready to welcome *them*.... And they had meant to put on their pretty summer dresses—and here they were with only their morning blouses and skirts on.... However, there was no time to change now—Miss Crabingway was waiting to see them. It was useless to try to remember all the things they had meant to say and do before meeting Miss Crabingway—there was no time for regrets. Before they realized what was happening they were mounting the stairs in solemn, single file, Pamela leading the way and Caroline bringing up the rear—while Martha stood at the foot of the staircase, an enigmatical smile on her face.

Outside the room door which had been locked to them for so long the girls stopped. All was silent within. Each of the girls felt as if the loud beating of her heart must be heard by the other three. They were all rather nervous. What would they see on the other side of the door?—the door which they had so religiously avoided going near, until now. What would Miss Crabingway be like?—Miss Crabingway, who had made such queer rules for them during their stay in her house.

Pamela knocked gently on the door with her knuckles.

The sound of a chair leg scraping on the floor inside could be heard, and then a voice said ”Come in.” So Pamela turned the door handle and the four girls

went in.

Each of the girls, at some time or other during the last six months, had imagined the meeting with Miss Crabingway at the end of their visit; the imagined meetings had been dramatic or comfortable, according to the girls' moods or temperaments; but none of them had imagined anything like the meeting that actually occurred. To begin with, no one had thought of it taking place in the locked-up room, curiously enough.

Miss Crabingway, who had been sitting at the farther end of the room in a low wicker chair beside a table littered with papers, rose as they entered and stood gazing toward them intently. For the space of half a minute she stood quite silent, taking stock of her four visitors—and they stood gazing at her.

Quite unlike Pamela's imagined picture of her, Miss Crabingway was small and thin, about fifty years of age, with exceedingly bright eyes and bushy white hair. Her nose was large and aquiline, of the variety generally termed roman. It is supposed that people with large noses have strength of will and character; it may have been Miss Crabingway's nose that indicated her character, but it was certainly her eyes that appeared to be the most compelling *force* about her; they were eager, restless, keenly-alive-looking brown eyes. After the girls had noticed her eyes and nose and hair, and her thin-lipped wide mouth, they became aware that Miss Crabingway was dressed in a coat and skirt of some soft dark brown material. It was odd to see Miss Crabingway dressed, with the exception of a hat, as if to go out of doors at this time in the morning; at least, it seemed odd to the girls, who had expected to find her having breakfast in bed, perhaps, or, at any rate, sitting in a flannel dressing-gown.

There was no time at present to take in the details of the 'locked-up room,' but the first impression was one of sombreness with regard to the furnishings, and although it was an airy room, with a very high ceiling and four windows, yet it seemed a dark room on account of the ivy which grew round the windows, and even across the panes in some parts. Then it was gradually borne in upon the girls that nearly everything in the room was duplicated!

There were two four-poster beds with exactly the same coloured hangings and draperies, two chests of drawers, two ottomans (gay and modern and chintz-covered), two wicker-chairs, two small round tables, two fire-places—one at each end of the long room—and two carpets which met in the centre of the floor, two high wardrobes, and so on—so that whenever one caught sight of something fresh, one immediately looked round for its double—and was sure to find it. The ornaments on the two mantelpieces were exactly the same.... All this fascinated one so strangely that Pamela even found herself about to look round for two Miss Crabingways.

But there was only one Miss Crabingway, and her keen eyes travelled from

one to another of the girls, and then quickly returning to look again at Beryl, remained staring at her critically.

Then all of a sudden she began to talk as if continuing a conversation with the girls which had already been in progress for some time. The girls hardly took in what she said—they were so surprised—but afterward, when they tried to remember, it seemed to have been something about red serge and water-cress, and the difficulty of living in rooms up six pairs of stairs, if you were a plumber and suffered from rheumatism.... When they thought this over seriously, it seemed too silly; but, nevertheless, it was certainly the impression the girls got of Miss Crabingway's torrent of conversation. The manner in which Miss Crabingway appeared to be continuing some discussion with them puzzled the four girls greatly at first; afterward, they learnt that this was one of Miss Crabingway's little peculiarities—she never publicly recognized the existence of introductions and farewells, but on seeing a fresh arrival would continue a conversation as if the new-comer had been there all the time. She would greet some one who had been absent for years as if he or she had just walked down the garden to see how the lettuces were growing and had then wandered back into the house again. It was an odd trick of Miss Crabingway's, and an inconvenient one sometimes, besides being bewildering. Yet it gave a curious impression that Miss Crabingway was with you all the time, and that she had been watching you throughout the years with those eager eyes of hens. In the same manner she declined to say good-bye, always giving the impression that she was coming along with you—in fact, would catch you up in a few minutes, before you reached the station. It was only when you had been talking with her for some time that you discovered that she did realize there were such things as absence, time, and space.

"However," Miss Crabingway continued, "I want to have a short talk with you all.... But why stand by the door, my dear girls? There are plenty of chairs, and an ottoman here by the window."

At this invitation the girls crossed the room and seated themselves in chairs and on the ottoman, which held two—Beryl and Caroline.

"We are very pleased to meet you, Miss Crabingway, and we want to thank—" Pamela began, when Miss Crabingway broke in suddenly.

"What was the date yesterday?" she asked.

Pamela, taken aback for a moment, replied, "Oh—the 27th, I think."

"Ah," said Miss Crabingway. "Yes, I'm glad I sent Joseph Sigglesworth that telegram. He never can remember dates—especially after the 8th of each month. They always send him in two rashers of bacon every morning for his breakfast during the first week in each month—after that they give him boiled eggs every day until the end of the month, and it becomes so monotonous that he can't distinguish one day from another. It's certainly rather confusing, isn't it? I've

told him I'd change the restaurant or coffee-house, or whatever it is that supplies him with breakfast; but he's used to it, and he doesn't like change—so it's no good my talking or giving him calendars—I just send him a telegram.”

Miss Crabingway seated herself and began rustling and sorting the papers on the little table in front of her.

”And now,” she continued in her decisive voice, flashing a glance round her puzzled audience, and once again looking last and longest at Beryl, ”I didn't ask you to come up here in order to discuss Joseph Sigglesythorne's breakfast—as you will doubtless guess. I asked you here to tell you a true story, and, if you please, don't speak to me until I've finished.”

Without more ado Miss Crabingway gave a dry little cough and began hurriedly:

”There was an elderly person who was rich, and lonely—” she paused for a second, then added with emphasis, ”and crotchety! Yes, that's what she was, though most of her acquaintances called her eccentric, and quaint—out of politeness.... As she grew older she grew more and more lonely; and realizing one day (when she was feeling ill and depressed) that she couldn't take her money with her when she died, she determined that she would make use of it now and give some benefit and enjoyment to herself, and, if possible, to others.... She—she had taken a great fancy to a young girl she had come across recently—the daughter of a very old and valued friend who died some years back.... And what made her particularly—crotchety, was that she had wanted to adopt this girl, and the girl's relatives had refused. For what reason, it is impossible to say! For the relatives were not over-rich, nor over-fond of the girl.... Probably it was because the relatives were not offered enough money.... Anyway, the elderly person had a quarrel with the relatives, and the elderly person went off in a huff, which she afterward regretted—and would have gone back and said so, only about this time some urgent business affairs called her away from home. Before she went she thought of a plan whereby she could give the young girl she liked a rest from her relatives, and at the same time help her to develop her character. For the elderly person had long cherished a belief that most young girls in their early teens would do better in after life if they had a chance to develop their characters, for a time, away from the influence of their parents or guardians.... Having heard of three other young girls whom she thought it would be interesting to try the experiment on, the elderly person sent out invitations to all four, adding a little inducement, in the shape of a sum of money, to each.”

Miss Crabingway, having now touched on a subject in which she was evidently greatly interested, went on to express her ideas about character development at some length, adding that when she was a girl herself she had suffered from character-suppression, and had been cramped and moulded by her own par-

ents so that she had not an idea nor opinion of her own all the years she lived under their influence.

"I was merely an echo," she said, "and all my thoughts and opinions were second-hand."

Miss Crabingway's roman nose seemed to be contradicting these words even as they were uttered, but her keen, earnest eyes assured one that she was speaking the truth.

"I think there comes a time," she went on, "when it is best for every girl to think and act for herself—to get used to relying on herself, and not on others. This does not mean being rebellious, you know—it means just clear thinking, and acting self-reliantly."

So absorbed did Miss Crabingway become in her theory that she forgot all about the 'elderly person' and slipped unconsciously into the first person, mentioning the little girl she had wanted to adopt by name. Even before she mentioned the name the other three girls had guessed who it was, and several quiet and curious glances had been cast in the direction of Beryl as she sat, silent and pale, her eyes on the ground. The girls had expected that Miss Crabingway was going to say something special about Beryl by the way her glance kept wandering to Beryl's face, studying it affectionately, yet anxiously.

"You see, I was anxious to try the experiment, but most of all I was anxious to obtain congenial companions for—for Beryl," Miss Crabingway continued. "I induced Beryl's relatives to allow her to come and stop at the house while I was away—it doesn't matter how I induced them.... And then I made a few rules; one for the purpose of keeping these relatives from worrying Beryl—of course it was a little hard on you other girls, perhaps..."

("I should think it was," thought Isobel to herself.)

"... But it was only for a short while, and it would help to develop character—and, after all, elderly people *will* have their little fads and whims—especially if they're eccentric," she said the last word a little bitterly, as if recalling some one's opinion of her. "Well, the plan has worked out fairly successfully, I hope.... Whether your visit here has strengthened your characters—only the future can show. I shall never know—because I did not know you before—but you will each be able to judge for yourself.... I hope very much that it has helped you all, and done you all good.... Of one thing I feel sure—it has done this old house good to have fresh young people about the rooms and up and down the stairs. The place had grown old and grave and silent through long association with old and silent people. It needed some laughter and young voices..." Miss Crabingway paused. "I have had constant news of you all, from Martha ... and Martha says everything has gone along all right?"

There was a questioning note in Miss Crabingway's voice as she paused

again and scanned the intent young faces before her; so that presently Pamela, catching the inquiring gaze directed on herself, said:

"I—I think it has—I hope it has—anyway, I have enjoyed being here very much, and it has done me good—in many ways. Though being cut off from home was awfully hard to get used to...."

She had scarcely realized yet that her feelings, or in fact the feelings of any of them excepting Beryl, were a matter of secondary importance to Miss Crabingway. Beryl was the chief reason for the invitation to stay at Chequertrees, for the rules drawn up for them to observe during their stay, for the offer of fifty pounds each. It was all done for Beryl's sake, for Beryl's happiness. It was difficult at first to readjust one's outlook and see things from this new point of view.... But why had Miss Crabingway chosen Pamela to act as hostess? Possibly because when she saw Beryl and 'took a fancy to her' she recognized that Beryl was not the sort of girl to like the position, and so had relieved her of the responsibility and left her free to devote herself to whatever work she preferred and to develop her character unfettered. To Pamela, Isobel, and Caroline it seemed an elaborate yet simple explanation of their invitation to Chequertrees. In order to achieve her ends Miss Crabingway seemed to have taken unnecessary trouble, the three girls thought; but, of course, they were not acquainted with Miss Crabingway's 'eccentric' ways, neither did they know the nature of one of the relatives of the little girl Miss Crabingway had wished to adopt.

There were still some questions that the girls wanted answered. What had the locked door got to do with the story? And how did Miss Crabingway know that they would prove 'congenial' companions for Beryl?—as a matter of fact all of them had not. It was surely rather risky to invite them without seeing them?

"I should like to say that I think Pamela has been a splendid hostess," remarked Caroline, suddenly and unexpectedly.

This was echoed at once by Isobel and Beryl.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Miss Crabingway, smiling. "I knew Pamela's mother, and I knew her grandmother—and I felt sure I was safe in choosing Pamela. Of course there was a risk—a great risk; you might have turned out a dreadful set of girls! ... But Martha would have told me if anything had been going wrong—and I should have managed to come down from Scotland for a week-end to see for myself.... I—I want to hear now what you think of my plan?"

She looked across at Beryl; but Beryl's eyes were on the ground and she was silent.

Isobel and Caroline both said they considered it a great success; they had enjoyed themselves immensely. And then Isobel went on to tell Miss Crabingway about Sir Henry and Lady Prior, and how the rule about relatives had placed her in an awkward predicament—at which Miss Crabingway seemed much amused,

to Isobel's concealed annoyance.

"Ah, well, never mind," said Miss Crabingway, "you can soon put matters right. Lady Prior is coming here this afternoon."

"This afternoon!" echoed Isobel.

"Yes. I have sent out invitations to a few friends I thought you might all like to meet to-day—that's why I thought we would have this little 'business' talk this morning.... And so you—you have had a happy time here—have you, Beryl?" Miss Crabingway put the direct question looking earnestly across at Beryl, who was still sitting motionless, her face very pale.

"I—I think you planned everything very well," stammered Beryl. She said no more, but sat gazing miserably before her at the opposite wall. A tremendous struggle was going on in Beryl's mind; she was working herself up to do a thing she shrank from with all her might. "I must do it *now—now*. I owe it to her," the thought pricked her conscience. "Why not tell Pamela, and get her to explain to Miss Crabingway—or ask to speak to Miss Crabingway alone," urged another thought. "But the other girls are sure to hear in the end—and get the story a roundabout way—probably exaggerated," she argued to herself. "Oh, but it is so hateful—telling it before them all—and it will hurt *her* to hear that I am the only one of the four of us who has failed her... Much better speak out now—it'll be much the best in the end.... Oh, but I can't.... I haven't got the courage...." And so the struggle went on.

"And now we come to the real business of the day," said Miss Crabingway. "I must just ask you each a question or so about the rules I drew up, and then we shall know what to do when Mr Sigglesworth arrives this afternoon."

She then went on to ask each girl if she had tried to find out what was in the locked-up room. And one after the other each gave her word of honour that she had not.

A smile flickered across Miss Crabingway's face. "Then Joseph Sigglesworth has lost," she said. "And I'm very glad. You can see what the room contains—only my personal belongings and papers. When I locked them up I had a small wager with Joseph Sigglesworth regarding the curiosity of girls. He said one or more of you *would* look through the keyhole, in spite of everything—I said you would *not* ... and I have won. He now owes me a photograph of himself," Miss Crabingway laughed to herself. "He has never been taken before, and hates the idea—but the loser pays, and go to the photographer he must. I'm sure it will be a dreadful likeness—and I shall frame it and hang it on the wall as his punishment.... I suppose you wonder why I chose Joseph Sigglesworth as my deputy—to bring my invitation to each of you. Eh?"

"Well, we did rather wonder," admitted Pamela.

"I couldn't come myself, being so rushed for time, and so I chose the

shrewdest person I knew. I knew I could trust him to see what kind of girls you were—but had I known for certain how wrong he would be about 'girls' curiosity' I don't think I should have trusted him.... I knew he would appear a bit singular, but I didn't mind that.... What did it matter? The whole idea was just an eccentric old woman's whim—and your parents allowed you to humour me, as I hoped they would." And here Miss Crabingway began to chuckle, and she went on chuckling until she was obliged to get out her handkerchief and dry her eyes. The girls meanwhile sat looking on, uncomfortable, and not knowing whether it would be more polite to laugh also or keep serious. Miss Crabingway puzzled them; one minute she was quite business-like and sensible, and the next she was talking in an apparently inconsequent way. When she had dried her eyes and become serious again, Miss Crabingway went on to question them about the other rule she had made, and said she supposed that none of them had seen, spoken, or written more than post-cards to their various relatives.

"I have seen Lady Prior—but not spoken; I've told you all about that, haven't I?" said Isobel.

"Yes—yes—oh, that's all right," replied Miss Crabingway.

And Isobel knew that her Wishing Well wish had come true, and that she had not done anything to forfeit her fifty pounds.

Both Pamela and Caroline said they had strictly observed the rule, Pamela mentioning, at the same time, how she had caught sight of her father in London.

"Oh, of course, that's all right. Quite unavoidable—quite. That's good then, so far...." She turned to Beryl, but before she could speak, Beryl, who looked ghastly white, stood up suddenly.

"There's something I want to tell you all," she said.

CHAPTER XIX

BERYL CONFESSES

Beryl looked down at the surprised and inquiring faces gazing up at her, and her new-found courage flickered for a moment—and she had thought the struggle for courage was over; but only for a moment did she pause and twist her fingers nervously together. Now she had burnt her boats she must go through with it.

"I—I—oh, Miss Crabingway—I didn't know—I never guessed you wanted me—but I can see things clearly now. You thought out such a kind plan to help me

a bit and give me happiness—and I have been happy here—in spite of everything. But—oh, how can I tell you—I have failed you, the only one of the four of us who has failed you. Instead of growing stronger in character I have grown weaker—I know I have.... I have been so afraid to tell the truth. I thought—I thought Isobel would despise me if she knew I'd been to a Council school..”

Isobel started.

”... if she knew my Aunt Laura kept a small and shabby shop and served behind the counter; if she knew,” her voice dropped, ”where my father died.... I felt out of place in this house at first among these others who had nice clothes and manners—my clothes were all wrong.... Pamela—Pamela has been a brick—I told her something about all this, and she helped me not to mind. But I've said so many things that were not true since I've been here—I'm telling the truth now, though, I am indeed. And, oh, I'm so sorry—I couldn't help it—but I—I have seen and spoken to my Aunt Laura several times since I've been here.”

”What!” exclaimed Miss Crabingway. Had, then, the thing that she had taken such trouble to avoid happened after all?

”Yes,” said Beryl. ”A few weeks ago I came suddenly face to face with her one dark night—the night we returned from London, in the rain—you remember?” She half turned toward Pamela, then went on quickly: ”I didn't speak to her then. I was frightened, and ran on quickly to join the others who were a little way ahead. When I got home I discovered that while we had all been out my Aunt Laura must have got into the house and made her way to my bedroom, where she had left a note for me.”

Caroline leant forward at this point.

”You were quite right in thinking some one had been in your room that night, Caroline. She mistook it for mine, and in rummaging about to see if she could find any indication to show that it was my room she disarranged some of your things. I'm so thankful she didn't take anything from your room—she might have done, you know, but luckily you hadn't left any money lying about. It was money she wanted. In the note which she was afraid to send through the post, but left in my room instead, she told me that I must let her have five pounds immediately, or she would be summoned—and might have to go to prison. And then what would people think of me, she said, living in luxury and letting my aunt, who had brought me up like her own daughter, go to prison! The money was very urgently needed, she said, and she told me where and when I could meet her outside the village and hand her the money.... So I met her,” Beryl went on in a dreary voice, ”and handed her the money I had recently received as pocket-money—but it wasn't enough.... Afterward she wanted more money—and at last I had to borrow a pound from Pamela—who was good enough to trust me and ask no questions—and I lent this to my aunt as well. She made me promise, on

my honour, never to tell a soul about this money-lending, or about her speaking to me, as if I did I should lose the fifty pounds, and it was very important that I should not do this, she said; no one would ever know about her coming to see me—for, of course, no one knew her in the village. When she came down to Barrowfield she would generally stop the night, sometimes two nights, at that little cottage opposite—so that she could watch me, and wait her opportunity to get money. She knew she could frighten me into doing what she wanted—and she did frighten me—shadowed me—followed me about.... It was she who was up at the Wishing Well that night, Pamela—do you remember? Aunt Laura only came down here occasionally—whenever she wanted more money. For a long time after I was here I never dreamt she was anywhere near the village.... I—I think, from what she has said to me, that she thought it very unfair for me to have anything that Cousin Laura couldn't share—and was awfully angry because I couldn't give her more money; she had got it into her head that there was a lot of money to be had here, and she hated the idea of Pamela, Isobel, and Caroline having any money that might have come to me—and so to her, and Cousin Laura.... Oh, Miss Crabingway, I never knew the truth about you wanting to adopt me." Beryl had hard work to keep her voice steady. "She never told me you had wanted to adopt me.... But it's a good job you didn't—now that you know what I am.... Oh, I hate myself," she burst out passionately, and the tears which she had kept back for so long sprang to her eyes and began rolling, unheeded, down her cheeks. "It's all been such a muddle of little deceitful things—and all for a few wretched sovereigns.... I've broken my word to you, and I've broken my promise to my aunt, and told you everything now—and may this be the last promise I shall ever break."

Poor Beryl had been so long in fear of her Aunt Laura and what she might do, and had brooded on the whole matter so much, that she had exaggerated everything in her own mind until it had assumed giant proportions; she felt she had forfeited all right to respect from the others, and had spoilt the great chance of her life—the chance of being adopted by Miss Crabingway. Beryl had certainly been weak, and had told stories, and had broken her word to Miss Crabingway and to her aunt—still, that was the extent of her misdoings.

Miss Crabingway, looking at her, thought that things had been made too hard for Beryl. If only there had been somebody to stand by her and help her—Miss Crabingway pulled herself up sharply. Had she made a mistake in thinking that all girls need to develop their character without any outside help and control? It might answer in three cases out of four; but there was always the fourth case—the girl who had not had the advantages of a happy, fearless childhood. It was fear, fear of some one or something, that made people deceitful and made them tell untruths. Miss Crabingway felt a rush of keen disappointment that her

plans had been spoiled, that the one girl for whom she had taken so much trouble had failed her. And yet Miss Crabingway felt that she herself was more to blame than Beryl. She might have known that Beryl's aunt would try to obtain money from the child, if she thought she had any. She might have known that Beryl would not have had an upbringing that would have taught her to be frank and fearless if it came to keeping her word to Miss Crabingway and facing the consequences of her aunt's wrath, had Beryl refused to answer her request for money.... Beryl had been outspoken enough now that the end had come ... and the consequences...?

Meanwhile the silence which had followed her last words had become unbearable to Beryl. Burying her face in her hands—she was crying in earnest now—she passed quickly out of the room, and the door clicked sharply behind her.

Pamela half rose, as if to follow her.

"Yes, do," said Miss Crabingway huskily, and stood up herself. "Tell her—everything will be all right. Poor child! She's not to blame—it's I—I might have known her Aunt Laura wouldn't leave her alone.... Where did she say the woman stayed? ... I wonder if she's there now by any chance? ... I'm going to see."

And while Pamela went in search of Beryl Miss Crabingway strode hatless across the green in search of the woman with the limp, leaving Caroline and Isobel to discuss the whole affair in detail.

What Miss Crabingway said to Beryl's aunt, whom she found on the verge of departure from the little white cottage with the green shutters, it is not necessary to record. It is sufficient that she gave Aunt Laura so stern a dressing-down that at the end of half an hour Aunt Laura was reduced to a meek acceptance of Miss Crabingway's terms. The aunt confessed to Miss Crabingway how, when Beryl had come to Barrowfield, she had followed her down by the next train, and by good fortune had discovered the little house opposite Chequertrees where apartments were to be had. And so she had put up there from time to time while her daughter Laura looked after the shop at Enfield, so that she could watch what Beryl was doing 'playing the lady' while her poor Cousin Laura served bacon and rice and currants in the stuffy little shop. On Cousin Laura's account, "poor, dear, good girl," she seemed to resent greatly Miss Crabingway's choice of Beryl, and thought she was justified in getting all she could from Beryl, considering that she had brought her up like her own daughter ever since Beryl's mother had died.

"And now she's spoiled all her chances—and mine as well," said Aunt Laura. "Tell her to pack up her things and come home with me in half an hour. I was just about to start off myself, not knowing—"

"That I would be back sooner than you expected—you didn't wish to meet

me, I presume?" said Miss Crabingway.

"You bet," said Aunt Laura, inelegantly. "My poor little Laura's worked to death in the shop, so you go and tell that haughty miss to pack up quick and come along home with me."

But nothing was further from Miss Crabingway's mind. She was determined to give Beryl another chance. And so she told Aunt Laura, much to the latter's surprise. They talked the matter over again, and after much haggling on Aunt Laura's part, and threats on Miss Crabingway's part, and arguments on both sides, they at length came to a hard and fast agreement.

The result of which was that Miss Crabingway returned to Chequertrees to greet Beryl as her newly-adopted niece, while Aunt Laura limped away to the station with her purse a little heavier than when she came, and took the train back to Enfield and Cousin Laura. She limped away out of Beryl's life and out of this story once and for all.

And so Beryl's Wishing Well wish came true.

CHAPTER XX

A NEW BEGINNING

That same day, in the afternoon, a group of happy people were gathered on the lawn chatting together in Miss Crabingway's garden—for the guests she had invited were no others than Pamela's mother and Michael and Doris; Isobel's mater and brother Gerald, and Lady Prior and her two daughters; and Caroline's mother—a plump, placid little soul, remarkably like her daughter in appearance. Miss Crabingway had thought this little surprise would please the girls—and it would be nicer for them to travel home with their own people.

Miss Crabingway admitted to herself that she would have liked all the girls to stay a few days longer, so that she could get to know them better, but all arrangements had been made and she could not upset them at the last moment.

The only person, of course, who had no relatives to meet her at the garden party was Beryl. But to judge from her happy, smiling face as she helped to hand round the tea she did not regret this fact. Her gratitude to Miss Crabingway was deep and sincere, and she meant to do all in her power to live up to the best that was in her. She and Miss Crabingway had had a long and serious talk together in the early afternoon, which ended in mutual expectations of a happier future for

both of them. Though Beryl had lost her fifty pounds, she had gained far more in Miss Crabingway's friendship; and, although she did not know this at present, Miss Crabingway had made up her mind to give Beryl a fairly substantial pocket-money allowance now that she was her properly adopted niece. Beryl was to continue her musical studies—that had already been arranged.

Freed from the shadow of Aunt Laura, and the bullying and the secret threats, Beryl felt a different girl—and looked it too. Her only tinge of sorrow was the parting with Pamela—but even that was to be only for a time. Later on Pamela was to come and stop with her for a holiday, and she and Miss Crabingway were to visit Pamela's home.

As for Pamela, she was in a real 'beamy' mood this afternoon at having mother and Michael and Doris with her again. She showed them all over the place, pointing out her favourite spots. She even found an opportunity of introducing them to Elizabeth Bagg.

"I'm so glad you've seen everything and everybody," she said. "Now you will be able to see things in your mind's eye when I talk about them."

During the afternoon Michael tried to get into conversation with Isobel's brother Gerald, who was about his age, but found it difficult work, as Gerald was far more interested in his own immaculate clothes, and smooth hair, his cigarette, and the various girls present, than he was in Michael or anything Michael had to say.

Isobel and her mater hung delightedly on Lady Prior's words, and as they sat in the shade of the trees at the end of the lawn, an invitation to come and stay at the Manor House sometime in the near future was given to Isobel, and accepted eagerly.

Caroline methodically piloted her mother round the house and garden, and presently left her talking to Mrs Heath while she went indoors at a signal from Pamela, who whispered, "Miss Crabingway wants us a minute."

In the drawing-room Pamela, Caroline, and Isobel found awaiting them Miss Crabingway and Mr Joseph Sigglesworth (who had just arrived). With due solemnity the girls were each presented with a cheque for fifty pounds, and the news was broken to Mr Sigglesworth that he was to go and have his photograph taken, at which he looked very crestfallen.

There was just one other little incident that took place before the afternoon came to a close—it had been crowded out of the morning's events.

The girls gave Miss Crabingway the small gifts they had made for her: Pamela, a sketch of Chequertrees; Caroline, a hand-embroidered tray-cloth; Beryl, a waltz which she had composed herself, and had copied out in a manuscript music-book. She offered it to Miss Crabingway very shyly and with much diffidence. "It's the only thing I could do myself," she said apologetically.

Isobel presented her photographs, enlarged and handsomely framed; they were photographs of the other three girls in the garden. Miss Crabingway was immensely pleased and touched by the girls' thought for her. Something of their own work; she could not have wished for anything better, she said, and thanked them warmly.

To Martha and Ellen each of the girls gave a little gift, such as a pair of gloves, and handkerchiefs, and bottles of eau-de-Cologne, and in addition each gave a photograph of herself (having overheard Martha express a wish for the photographs).

"Just in case you forget what I look like and don't recognize me next time I knock at the front door," said Pamela laughingly to Martha.

"Oh, Miss Pamela, just as if I'd forget you," said Martha. "But you couldn't have thought of a better present, or one that would please me more, and I thank you and I shall value it greatly. What is nicer than a nice photograph, I always say."

And now dusk has fallen and all is silent in Miss Crabingway's garden. The laughter and voices have died away, and far away through the night rushes a train bearing Pamela, her mother, and Michael and Doris, homeward. Mr Heath is waiting at Marylebone Station to meet them, and Olive and John have been allowed to stay up an hour later than usual in order to welcome home their long-absent sister.

In another train Caroline and her mother journey back to the busy little provincial town where they live. While Isobel, seated beside her mater, with a cosy coat wrapped round her, whirls along the country lanes in the motor which brother Gerald is driving.

An old gentleman climbs into a crowded bus at Charing Cross; he has a remarkably high, bald forehead, which becomes visible when he removes his hat; he stands holding on to a strap in the bus, his thoughts far away. He is thinking of a little country village, and in the midst of all the bustle and life of London he feels suddenly lonely. The bus rattles on toward the Temple—and he thinks of his deserted, paper-strewn room in Fig Tree Court, and he is overcome by a great wave of pity for himself; he begins to feel exceedingly sorry for himself. Suddenly his expression changes to one of dismay and exasperation—he has remembered that he must visit a photographer to-morrow.

At the same moment, far away down at Barrowfield, there is a light in the drawing-room of Chequertrees, and some one is playing softly on the piano. Miss Crabingway sits on the couch by the fire, a book in her hands—but she is not reading. She is looking across at the girl who is playing the piano and her

eyes are full of dreams.

The red blind in the dining-room, where supper is being laid for two, shines warmly out from among the rustling leaves that are whispering round the house—just as it did six months ago. But to-night the window of the little white cottage opposite is dark, and there is no one watching the red blind.

* * * * *

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