

PAMELA
HANSFORD
JOHNSON

Her Life, Works and Times



WENDY POLLARD



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In 1927, *The Town Crier*, a monthly magazine published in London and aimed at professional and creative women, accepted the poem reproduced below for publication. It was the only literary offering in their March issue, which otherwise contained articles such as 'Women and the League of Nations', 'The Need for Women Police', and 'The Art and Craft of Photography'.

The Curtain

P.H.J.

Cold, blue, mysterious veils of morning mist,
What do you shield from view? Dark factories
And reeking chimneys? Garbage-strewn grey streets,
And shabby figures of the coarsened hawkers
Wheeling their broken barrows through the town,
Barrows whose green paint blisters in the sun,
Barrows heaped high with brown-green cabbages
And dirty purple beetroots, bruised tomatoes,
Whose scarlet lends a momentary colour
To sordid streets? Or do you hide the forms
Of sweating workers from the factories
With cracked red hands, and hopeless, pallid faces,
Wrapped in their old brown shawls? And do you veil
Black alleyways and soulless tenements
More cruel when touched with glinting, golden sun-
light?

You may.

But when your mist clears I might see
Brown cottages, green downs and long white roads,
Bright silver streams, and purple iris smiling
Entranced at her reflection; sombre woods
With sunlit clearings where brown rabbits play,
And, at a footfall, cock their snowy tails
And disappear in haste within a burrow;
And clumps of ladies' smock, and meadowsweet
White, lacy, dancing; and tall copper beeches
And silver aspens, and green, stolid oaks;
Nut-trees, o'er which the squirrel gambols free
And impudently flourishes his tail
At the old, dusty owl that blindly blinks
Into the light.

Draw your blue curtain, Morn,
That I may marvel at the world behind!

The editor was unlikely to have known that the remarkably self-assured poet was a fourteen-year-old Clapham schoolgirl, destined to become an acclaimed novelist and critic. This is her story.

Contents

	<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
	<i>Introduction and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1	A Clapham Childhood	1
2	<i>Aut Inveniam Viam, Aut Faciam</i>	17
3	'My Darling Dylan'	32
4	'A Remarkable English First Novel'	62
5	Married Life amid the Clouds of War	85
6	Surviving on the Home Front	110
7	'Waving Flags on Top of a Huge Rubble-Heap'	126
8	Chill Outside and Within	146
9	The Dark and the Light	161
10	'I Have Been Infinitely, Infinitely Enriched'	180
11	'Divorce-Nausea', 'Wounded Pride', finally 'Wondrous Joy'	202
12	A Fragile Start to a Second Marriage until the Arrival of 'Borox'	221
13	Second Exile from the City	238
14	"'And Have <i>You</i> Ever Written, Lady Snow?'"	264
15	East and West	295
16	Attacks, Scandals and Distresses	315
17	Pamela the Crusader, Part One	345
18	Pamela the Crusader, Part Two	369
19	'This World is in a Frightful State'	389
20	'So End my Fifties ...'	417
21	'Why, This is HELL – Nor am I out of it'	443
22	The Last Six Months	462
	Afterword	466
	<i>Notes</i>	469
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	487
	<i>Index</i>	491

List of Illustrations

Between pages 234 and 235

Family photographs, where not otherwise acknowledged, by kind permission of Lindsay Avebury.

- 1 Wedding photograph of Pamela's parents, Amy and Reginald (R.K.) Johnson.
- 2 Pierrot troupe, Clapham County Secondary School, c.1927.
- 3 Pamela and Amy, c.1920.
- 4 Pamela with Dylan Thomas, Caswell Bay, Swansea, 1934.
- 5 Ditto.
- 6 Wedding photograph of Pamela and (Gordon) Neil Stewart, Chelsea Registry Office, 1936.
- 7 Pamela with her children, Andrew and Lindsay, 1944.
- 8 Wedding photograph of Pamela and C.P. Snow, Christ's College, Cambridge, 1950.
- 9 Pamela with CPS and his brother Philip (in foreground), Venice, 1951. By kind permission of Stefanie Waine.
- 10 Portrait of Pamela, 1954, mounted by PHJ in her 'Progress Book'. By kind permission of Mark Gerson.
- 11 Pamela with CPS and their son Philip, Clare, Suffolk, 1954. By kind permission of Mark Gerson.
- 12 Russian hospitality, 1964.
- 13 Pamela, CPS and Sirikit, South Kensington, c.1965.
- 14 Launch of CPS's *Trollope*, 1975. By kind permission of Mark Gerson.
- 15 Pamela and CPS, Belgravia, 1976. By kind permission of Mark Gerson.

CHAPTER 1

A Clapham Childhood

PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON and her second husband, C.P. Snow, were to become the British and international intellectual celebrity couple of the mid-twentieth century. In 1960, the writer Ronald Blythe had emphasized the former's high literary standing, independent of her husband's, when introducing a lengthy profile of her in *Tatler and Bystander*: 'Lady Snow is Pamela Hansford Johnson, whose prolific novels [...] consistently cause critical rapture. She is also a leading authority on Proust.' Blythe later mentioned her husband as being distinguished both as a scientist and a novelist, and that together they formed 'a formidable family for literary talent, particularly as there is energy to match'.¹ In the United Kingdom, this fame was not to be without its drawbacks as it would lead to some arguably unwarranted attacks. Both Snows also, despite the Cold War, had the distinction of being acclaimed by the major literary figures in the USSR, as well as by the intelligentsia in the USA for their individual and joint achievements. In 1961, Sir Charles and Lady Snow were also deemed to have caught the public imagination sufficiently to warrant a joint photo-spread in American *Vogue*, as a couple whose titles, as the opening sentence proclaimed, 'never for a moment obscure [their] fame'.²

Further evidence of Pamela Hansford Johnson's popular renown in the USA may be gauged from an early Peanuts cartoon strip by Schulz, now framed and hung in her daughter's house. Lucy asks the scholarly Schroeder which authors she should read; he replies: 'You could start with Katherine Anne Porter, Joyce Carol Oates or Pamela Hansford Johnson.' Lucy's response is that she would be exhausted by the time she had read their triple names. With this in mind, I shall

be referring to the subject of this biography simply as Pamela; this still distances me a little from her, since to her friends and family she was always Pam.

Pamela and Charles Snow had both come a long way from modest backgrounds. Snow's brother and chronicler Philip emphatically stated that: 'There is no doubt that we were lower middle class. We were also poor; not so badly off as some of our neighbours but poor enough to impede our progress.'³ C.P. Snow would find that his Leicester childhood had much in common with his future wife's in South London. Biographies of women writers born in the early decades of the twentieth century commonly begin by sketching the privileged surroundings in which their subjects were born, and their aristocratic antecedents. These women might not themselves have had economic control over £500 a year, the amount famously decreed by Virginia Woolf to be the key to having 'the freedom and the courage to write',⁴ but the majority were free from the necessity of working for a living in a routine occupation. They were also more likely to have been educated at home by governesses rather than at a school.

Pamela, who was born in 1912, was educated at the local grammar school, which economic circumstances forced her to leave at the age of 16; despite her evident academic promise, she had then to abandon any thoughts of university. After a short course at secretarial college, she worked unwillingly in a bank until she had established herself as a writer. As far as one can gather, her original ambitions did not stretch much beyond having poems and short stories accepted for publication in various newspapers and periodicals; she later told an interviewer that even the 'minute sums of money' she received for these had been 'extremely valuable then'.⁵ But she was to become one of the most successful novelists of her period, both when measured in terms of critical acclaim, and popularity with her readers. She published 27 novels, several works of literary criticism, was a regular reviewer, lecturer and frequent broadcaster.

In a broadcast on Charles Dickens in 1949, later published in *The Listener* with the title, 'The Betrayal of Self in Fiction', Pamela maintained that:

the writer of prose fiction, merely because he is dealing with words, may uncover a very great deal of his own interior life. [...] As he gets nearer and nearer to the springs of the character he is creating, so he

gets dangerously near to the springs of his own [...] and often he reveals infinitely more than he has intended'.⁶

She returned to the topic in her later collection of essays, *Important to Me: Personalia* (1974). In the introduction, she admitted that a writer will have 'written himself and his life into his novels, no matter how much both are disguised', although she went on to say that she was conscious of 'only two direct self-portraits in the whole of my books'.⁷ Unusually, her first novels, although set in the location of her childhood, were not overtly autobiographical. Although she does not identify the self-portraits to which she refers, they are almost certainly the central characters of two novels written when she was middle-aged: Christine Jackson, the narrator of *An Impossible Marriage* (1954), and Alison Petrie, a young novelist, in Pamela's principal *roman à clef*, *Survival of the Fittest* (1968). Much of the background given to Christine Jackson, as the surname suggests, mirrors the circumstances of the author's early life, and Alison Petrie inhabits the same literary milieu as Pamela at the start of her writing career. But it is also possible to detect 'springs' from her 'own interior life' in the narrative and characterizations of several other of Pamela's novels.

Despite the near-penury of much of her childhood, Pamela's family, particularly on her mother's side, had been colourful. 53 Battersea Rise, Clapham, the substantial family house in which she was born and lived for the first 22 years of her life, had been bought by her maternal grandfather, Charles Edwin Howson, in the 1890s. Charles Howson, as an obituary in the Australian newspaper, *The Era*, related, came 'of an old and famed musical and dramatic stock', originally from England, but active in opera and musical theatre in Australia for many years. His father John, a tenor, and his uncle Frank, a baritone, had gone to Sydney from Tasmania in the 1840s, and John had at one time been manager of the chief theatre in Sydney. Other members of the family included Emma Albertazzi (*née* Howson, her husband being an Italian violinist), an operatic celebrity who took part in the first performance of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, and, in the following generation, another Emma Howson, who regularly sang in early Gilbert and Sullivan operas, creating the role of Josephine in *H.M.S. Pinafore*. A scrapbook which has come down to present-day Australian Howson family members includes a photograph of this Emma with the actress

Mrs Patrick Campbell (Beatrice Stella Tanner) with a comment that the two were cousins. However, there is no corroborating evidence in the autobiography of 'Mrs Pat', despite her very detailed account of every branch of her family.⁸

Charles Howson came to England in the 1870s, presumably to seek his fortune. *The Era* obituary quaintly notes that: 'The deceased gentleman had essayed the dramatic art on one occasion, supplying the place of harlequin. He was a musician and instrumentalist, stringed instruments being his *forte*.' But rank and file musicians did not earn very much, his acting career evidently never got off the ground, and Charles initially supplemented what income he came by in England by copying band parts at fourpence a time. He then had a stroke of luck by attracting the attention of Henry Irving while playing in the orchestra at the Lyceum in London. As Irving's biographer, Madeleine Bingham, relates, Irving was prone to 'strange promotions'.⁹ He had also found his stage manager, Henry Loveday, in the orchestra pit (in Edinburgh), and his theatre manager, Bram Stoker, working as a civil servant and part-time theatre critic in Dublin.

Charles was doubtless delighted to be offered regular employment, even though this would prove to be in the field of administration rather than performance, as he had married Helen Osborne a few years earlier, and they already had two daughters. It may well have been a shot-gun wedding (their first child, Clélia, known as Kalie, was born some six and a half months after the marriage). Helen was twenty whereas Charles was thirty-one. It is likely that neither family would have been happy with the union. Uriah Osborne, Helen's father, was a grocer, who probably viewed theatrical people as rogues and vagabonds. The Howsons, on the other hand, would have looked down at anyone in trade. Their granddaughter, Pamela, whose mother was the second daughter, Amy Clotilda, would later write of her Howson heritage, presumably in ignorance of Grandmother Helen's family background:

I have often thought that we had no recognisable class at all. We were thought of as 'Bohemians'. I am afraid my family was afflicted with a degree of snobbery: the thought of 'marrying into trade' afflicted them as it might have afflicted a noble Victorian. But none of us ever did. (*Important*, p.65)

Charles Howson's first two posts with Irving were those of 'agent in advance' and press agent, but for the greater part of the twenty-three years he served with Irving's Royal Lyceum Company, his official and grand-sounding title was Treasurer. His duties, however, seem to have been less impressive, principally because of constant friction between himself and Bram Stoker. Howson is never mentioned by name in Stoker's two-volume *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906). The only reference to the position he held comes in a chapter entitled 'Finance', in which Stoker seeks to explain away Henry Irving's well-known extravagance (which, although he attempts to minimize this, came close to the point of financial incompetence). Stoker maintains that his main concern was to conceal, or 'safeguard' as he puts it, the full financial position from those he designated as 'lesser officials':

Not one official of the theatre outside myself knew the whole of the incomings and the outgoings. Some knew part of one, some knew part of the other; not even that official who was designated 'treasurer' knew anything of the high finance of the undertaking.¹⁰

Stoker would doubtless have been incensed had he had access to the birth certificates of the children of this particular 'lesser official'. In the case of the elder two daughters, Charles Howson listed his occupation accurately as 'musician', but when his son Hosmer was born in 1887, when he had been working for Irving for only a few years, he described himself as 'Manager at a Theatre', and in 1889, on the birth of his fourth child Emma, 'Theatrical Manager'. As further evidence of the two men's mutual antipathy, Howson referred at home to Stoker merely as 'Irving's secretary', and, as his granddaughter related:

One day he came home with a greyish volume in his hands, and said to his children, 'Stoker has written a beastly book. It's all about people who suck other people's blood and lunatics who eat flies.' He put it straight on the fire. It was, of course, the first edition of *Dracula*. (*Important*, pp.67-68)

Henry Irving, however, seemed content with his 'divide and rule' policy, and continued to employ both men until his sudden death on tour in 1905. They both accompanied him on his triumphant tours of the United States, and, according to Madeleine Bingham, were

commended in the Boston *Journal* during the company's 1893-94 tour, as being 'entertaining men'. 'These Englishmen [*sic*]', the writer continued, 'have an unaffected manner, lacking in airs.'¹¹ Charles did not forget his family while away, one of his letters to the two older children, sent in December 1887, reads:

Papa sends you a Japanese picture-book which Kalie must read. I hope you are both very good girls and love your little brother. I will send you some nice books for Christmas. Be kind to Mother, and don't forget to think of your father so far away in America.¹²

As Pamela related, 'Irving liked to deck his stage with good-looking people, whether talented or not' and this resulted in the occasional employment of Helen Howson and her three daughters in non-speaking roles in Irving's more lavish productions (*Important*, pp.64-65). At the age of 14, Kalie is mentioned as being in the company in a lively, if rarely punctuated, letter home from her mother in Dublin:

Begorra and be jabers here we are right here! And don't I like Dublin faith and I do especially the jaunting cars and the whiskey and the Guinness stout. We were about 14 hours on the water getting here. It was very rough & they were all ill including Charlie. I was [and so] was Irving & 2 & 3 more. [...] I don't always get Charlie's company. [...] [He] is fairly well but doesn't get much time to himself. They are doing big business everywhere. [...] Manchester is their last place. They are all longing to get home. Kalie expects to be home about the 16 & she is looking forward to it so.¹³

But Irving's death virtually put an end to the family's involvement with the theatre; although Kalie and Amy continued to describe themselves as actresses and/or singers on official documents, they had few further engagements when the Lyceum Company closed. Amy did emulate her second cousin in joining the D'Oyley Carte Company, but her daughter recorded that 'she never rose higher than understudy to Yum-Yum (who did not fall ill)' (*Important*, p.65). Charles Howson died from heart failure two years after Irving at the age of 59; among those attending the funeral were many actors and musicians. Bram Stoker's attendance is not however recorded. We might know more about Charles Howson, had his diaries been preserved. Some years after his death, his daughters Amy and Kalie had found in the summer-house

at the end of their garden 'half a lifetime of diaries, written in violet ink in his lovely script, in *Italian*'. And, in a rare criticism of her mother, his granddaughter Pamela continued: 'And on the grounds that nobody would be able to read them – perhaps on other grounds too – they incinerated the lot. I am intrigued to think what may have been lost by this ridiculous action' (*Important*, p.64). The family connection with Irving was an important element in Pamela's early life. The hallways in the Clapham house were hung with Irvingiana – playbills, programmes, sketches of costumes, photographs. When she was forty, all the family anecdotes were still fresh enough in her mind for her to recreate the world of Victorian theatre in her novel, *Catherine Carter* (1952), the hero of which, Sir Henry Peverel, is incontrovertibly based on Sir Henry Irving.

Clapham had originated as a mediaeval village. At the turn of the eighteenth century, an ailing Pepys moved there on his doctor's advice to have the benefit of country air. Although by the time Charles Howson established the family in Battersea Rise, Clapham was developing into a London suburb, its urbanization hastened by the coming of the railway, it still retained rural aspects. Pamela pinpointed the changes in the twenty-odd years that followed:

We lived in a large brick terrace house bought by my grandfather some time in the eighties,¹⁴ when it looked out on fields where sheep might safely graze. But by the time I was born, the railway had come, and the houses had been built up right over the hills between it and us. (*Important*, p.11)

Christine, the narrator of *An Impossible Marriage*, also mentions the view of grazing sheep in her description of her family home, but continues that:

within ten years the view had been obliterated by a sudden seepage of lower middle-class houses and shops, and within another ten the seepage had streamed down through stratas of villa and potential slum to the very edges of the river.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in the early twentieth century, Clapham was still very different from the inner-London district it is today; the splendid eighteenth century merchants' houses around the Common were occupied by families with familiar household names, like Gorrings,

Hatchard, and Mappin, and Clapham was also the favoured neighbourhood for those successful in the field of entertainment. Among these, as local historian Gillian Clegg relates, were the prima donna, Adelina Patti, and the music hall singer, Vesta Victoria. Clegg also memorably defines another Clapham resident, Dan Leno, for generations who might not recognize the name, as the 'music hall singer, dancer and clog dancing champion of the world'.¹⁶ In 1912, the year of Pamela's birth, the thirteen-year-old Noël Coward moved to Clapham with his mother. In his first autobiography, he wrote of there being 'pleasant walks in Clapham along tree-shaded roads, neatly spaced with refined suburban houses, secure in small prosperity with their conservatories and stained glass windows and croquet lawns'. However, he continued that, 'from the "Plough" onwards down the Clapham Road the atmosphere became palpably commoner'.¹⁷ In the crowded streets away from the Common, there were still more modest houses with less distinguished occupants, and it was among these that Amy Howson had found her husband.

Reginald Kenneth Johnson was born in Powerstock, Devon, the home of his mother, Ada (née Hansford), but, contrary to family belief, his father, Andrew, did not himself come from the West Country, but from Huntingdon in East Anglia. Then too, family legend credited Andrew Johnson with having 'built the Manchester Ship Canal'. Perhaps that side of the family had felt a need to glamorize his achievements in an effort to compete with those of Charles Howson; any connection Andrew Johnson might have had with this engineering feat, which was constructed between 1888 and 1894, must have been very tenuous, since Johnson, described in the 1891 census as a 'Contractors' Accountant' was based in London throughout that period. In the same census, his son Reginald Kenneth, then 16, is described as 'Junior Shipping Clerk'. Not exactly trade, but a family that represented something of a come-down for a Howson to marry into, nevertheless.

Reginald (always known in the family as 'R.K.') became a minor colonial administrator in West Africa. His daughter accurately stated that he was Chief Storekeeper on the Baro-Kano railway, but placed this on the Gold Coast, rather than, as it is, in Nigeria. She was doubtless misled by her father's frequent allusions to 'the call of the Coast', when finding his long leaves in England tedious. Amy had

met Reginald during one of those leaves, and the Johnsons were no happier with the idea of an alliance with a theatrical family than the Obornes had been. However, their granddaughter said that they came to accept Amy as their son's wife. There seems to have been no suggestion that Amy should follow R.K. to Nigeria; indeed he was likely to have discouraged it. As Pamela later said, he enjoyed the 'long evenings on the verandahs with whisky and poker-games', and a wife and family would have been an unwelcome distraction (*Important*, pp.20-21). After their marriage, R.K. had been content to move into the Howson family home.

The couple's perception of their social status is manifest in the fact that they saw fit to announce Pamela's birth in the *Daily Telegraph*, as follows:

JOHNSON – On the 29th May, at 53 Battersea Rise, S.W., the wife (*née* Amy Howson) of R. KENNETH JOHNSON, of Lagos, late Baro-Kano Railway – a daughter.

The above form of words was standard for the time; indeed, several of the other birth announcements that day do not identify the mother other than as the wife of the father. The Johnsons' daughter was to receive the first names of Pamela Helen Hansford; there seems to have been no family connection with regard to her first name, but the two middle names were derived from her two grandmothers. It is not clear why the paternal grandmother's surname was chosen, rather than her first name, but Pamela would eventually be glad about this, since, as soon as she launched herself on a literary career, she elected to become known by the distinguished-sounding name of Pamela Hansford Johnson.

She was baptized at St Mark's Church, Battersea Rise, on 11 August 1912, then it was back to Nigeria for R.K. (it seems significant that he had given his address as Lagos in the *Daily Telegraph*), leaving his daughter with her mother's almost undivided attention. Their closeness was to become something of a burden in later life, but she certainly did not seem to resent it for the first twenty-five years. Again, this gave her a different perspective on life from more privileged writers, whose mothers were distant figures, and for whom a nursemaid or governess might have been far more important. Grandmother Helen, sadly changed through illness from the lively girl who had

followed her husband around the world with Irving's company, completed the manless family. She was to become totally blind by the time Pamela was ten. Aunt Kalie was a frequent, but at that time disruptive, visitor; she had never married, possibly because her father was said to have discouraged several suitors. Aunt Emma did marry, and moved out of London to a bungalow at Laleham in the Thames Valley. Little is known about the life of Pamela's uncle, Hosmer Charles, who died at the age of 37, when she was twelve.

Amy took at face value the title of a baby book she kept for Pamela. This was 'The Progress Book: An Illustrated Register of the Development of a Child from Birth till Coming of Age'. It was the sort that most first-time parents, even with the best of intentions, keep only for a year or two. They record the baby's first steps, first words, first illnesses, but entries soon lapse. But Amy faithfully noted the major, although somewhat pedestrian, events in Pamela's life up to the age of 18. Her first word, recorded as having been uttered at the precocious age of seven and a half months, was 'Dad-dad', and she is alleged to have mastered 'Pop Goes the Weasel' at about nine months. She had the usual childhood ailments – 'Measles (real – not German)' at two years, whooping cough at five – but was not to have mumps until the age of 16 nor chickenpox until 29 years old. Surprisingly enough, Amy did not record the constant blinding headaches (not at that time recognized as migraines) from which Pamela suffered throughout her life.

The most serious illness suffered in her childhood was nasal diphtheria when she was nine. In *Important to Me*, she described her stay in the Stockwell Fever Hospital as 'some six Dickensian weeks'; in fact, she was there from 15 January to 17 March 1922, nearly nine weeks. She did not feel particularly ill, she said, but she found the regime harsh. She was hungry and cold most of the time, and when she wrote about this to her mother (who was evidently not allowed to visit her), her letters were heavily censored. She also suffered greatly from her treatment from one of the nurses, who mocked her accent to the whole ward, thinking Pamela 'above herself' as, thanks to being brought up in a theatrical family, she spoke standard English. More than fifty years later, one particular humiliation to which that nurse had subjected her when in sole charge of the ward still rankled in her memory, and may account for her antipathy to hospitals later in life:

She would usually fetch me a bed-pan and sit me up on it (I would never demand one till the last vital moment) but then leave me there, despite my pleas, for any time up to three hours. She was the only dyed-in-the-wool sadist I have ever personally encountered in my life. (*Important*, p.37)

One important omission from the Progress Book was any mention of the birth of a sister, Beryl, when Pamela was seven. With her mother having observed the customary reticence of the period, Pamela had no awareness of the pregnancy, and suffered acute jealousy when so abruptly supplanted from her priority status. She had been brought up to be a religious little girl (her mother recorded her as being able to recite 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' at the age of two, and two years later, reciting the Lord's Prayer every night). Accordingly, she prayed with fervour under the hollyhocks in the garden to feel glad about the new baby. But, she later wrote: 'When she died of marasmus, a wasting disease, at the age of five or six months, I tried, under those same sacramental hollyhocks, to feel sorry. I couldn't. It was the beginning of guilt' (*Important*, p.22).

The importance of religion in her early life is further manifest from the fact that she gives the subject first place in the series of topics that comprise *Important to Me*. She had first been taken to nearby St. Mark's Church, where: 'On the whole, sermon apart, I enjoyed it: I revelled in Broad Church ritual. The Stanford *Tē Deum!* There was a real male choir in those days, and I would wait breathless for the great basses to come in with "the holy company of the apostles praise thee".' When she was fifteen, however, her aunt Kalie began to attend Clapham Congregational Church 'under the ministry of the brilliant, histrionic George Stanley Russell', and insisted on her niece accompanying her there. Pamela too fell under the spell of Russell, 'a tall, rubicund, rather portly man with a magnificent voice', and took her first Communion in his church (*Important*, pp.11-13). In later life, she was torn between the Church of England and the Congregational Church, and ended up, albeit with guilty regrets, only rarely attending either church. Nevertheless, a defining feature of her writing is her strong sense of morality, doubtless inculcated in her from her religious education. As John Raymond was later to comment: '[Pamela Hansford Johnson] is a profound moralist, though of a deliberately unpretentious kind, and each of her books is at bottom concerned with a moral situation.'¹⁸

As befitted a theatrical family, Pamela was introduced to the cinema and theatre at a comparatively early age; she saw her first moving picture show at the age of two. She later annotated the progress book to record that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had been her first Shakespearian experience at the age of nine; the same year, she went to *Peter Pan* and to several Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. The family went on holiday to the seaside regularly, and she was introduced to the delights of paddling, donkey rides and piers. Her first holiday abroad was in 1926, when she went to Heyst-sur-Mer in Belgium with her mother and her aunt Kalie (the sisters had attended school in Ecloo in Belgium at the height of their father's prosperity). She was to develop a lifelong affection for the country, which plays a significant role in three of her novels. Under the heading 'Mental Progress', Amy recorded her daughter's grasp of the alphabet at '3 years 3 months', and ability to read at six years old. However, doubtless hoping, at that relatively affluent time for the family, that Pamela might follow her into musical theatre, Amy took more interest in her daughter being 'exceedingly forward in memorising tunes'. At the age of two and a half, she proudly claimed that her child 'could sing over 30 songs, exclusive of nursery rhymes, tune perfect', and that she had an 'excellent musical ear'.

Pamela went to a local primary school, and, on passing the elementary examination of the Associated Board with 119 marks out of 150, won a place at the Clapham County Secondary School, a girls' grammar school. Within a year, however, the family's comfortable life in the big house on Battersea Rise had been shattered by the death of R.K. Home on leave, he had come to a sudden but unheroic end (later twice to be fictionalized by his daughter)¹⁹ in the lavatory in the middle of the night. His consistent lack of success in those poker games on tropical verandahs meant that he left nothing but debts. He did, however, unknowingly leave Pamela with one legacy about which she wrote towards the end of her life. In a newspaper article dealing with xenophobia and racialism, she wrote that she had never consciously experienced either of these prejudices:

This was probably in reaction to my father, an old-style civil servant on the Gold Coast [*sic*] for 20 years or more, who believed in paternalism and, I believe, practised it; but his racial attitudes would seem to most of us intolerable today. I remember that if, on his rare leaves,

he got on a bus with my mother and myself, and a black man got on also, my father would speedily get my family off again. He was a good man according to his lights, and his administration was said by his juniors to be a very fair one. They had sensed the wind of change that was coming, but not he. I was only 12 when he died, but my memories of his attitudes are very sharp.²⁰

For some years even before her father's death, the family had been making economies; they could no longer afford to occupy the whole of the house. Amy and Pamela had moved from their flat at the top of the house to share the semi-basement sitting-room as a bedroom, and their former accommodation was let to 'all manner of lodgers':

one was speedily removed, being suspected of sleeping sickness: one, a rubicund Welshman, got into fights on the stairways with my Uncle Charlie: one, who posed as a doctor living with his sister, sat quietly upstairs manufacturing pornographic literature, until the police caught up with him. (*Important*, p.67)

R.K.'s widow now had the burden of her husband's debts to clear, and, unable to take a full-time job because of her ailing mother, she took in typing to supplement their modest income. Pamela might therefore not have been able to continue at the grammar school, since the fees were £5 per term, not a negligible amount for them at that time. Amy was forced to plead with an acquaintance among the governors that the fees be remitted, and fortunately this was agreed.

From all accounts, Clapham County Secondary School (also known just as Clapham County School) was a model grammar school, and Pamela always acknowledged the crucial role it had played in her intellectual development. Up to the time of her first marriage, she continued to be involved with the Quondam Club (a much more interesting name, it had been decided, than CCS Old Girls), and she remained close to Ethel A. Jones, the headmistress throughout her time at the school, until the death of the latter in 1966. At her Memorial Service, Pamela (by then, Lady Snow) spoke with great affection of the woman she had known as 'Jonah'. This had been, she said,

an absurd nickname, meaningless except in relation to her surname [...]. Indeed, she seemed no more the kind of woman to have a

nickname than Jane Austen. 'Miss' Austen, 'Miss' Jones. That was how it should have been. Yet the mere fact that everyone called her Jonah (her old pupils still do) indicated something of her popularity.

Her genius, she continued, had been 'for bringing girls up the way they should go, without them really being aware of the process'.

Pamela thrived in the grammar school environment. She had already begun to write poetry, and at the age of 10, the youngest in a school of 550 girls, had a poem accepted for the school magazine. Thereafter she contributed at least one poem each year, and sometimes two; she became editor of the magazine in her final year. (The poem reproduced on the fly-leaf remained the only one to be published elsewhere until she was 18.) 'English, and particularly French, literature', she reminisced, 'were thoroughly taught, and I immensely enjoyed both: but I never realised how narrow the syllabus was in both cases.' Her love of the theatre was undiminished by having to study Shakespeare as a school subject:

From the age of eleven to about fourteen, I and a few like-minded schoolfriends saved up for our Saturday treat. This was invariably the same. We would climb to the top of the Monument, where we would eat our sandwiches, and look out on the panorama of London. Then we would go to the Old Vic – Lilian Bayliss' theatre – to sit on a hard gallery seat – price 6d – (or, I should say, 2½p) – and watch Shakespeare.

'What is there about Shakespeare', she wondered, 'that can intoxicate many children?' (*Important*, pp.87-88).

But in all the mathematical subjects, she proved unteachable: 'When it came to trigonometry, the mistress threw me over in despair: and actually gave me permission to sit at the back of the classroom and write poetry' (*Important*, p.83). This failing would in any case have frustrated Jonah's hope that Pamela would follow in her footsteps by reading English at Oxford; it was essential at that time to pass maths in order to matriculate, no matter how high a student's marks might have been in other subjects. And Pamela did achieve a Distinction in English and in Oral French, but as previously mentioned, for financial reasons, university was out of the question. 'Grants were very slender then,' she said, 'and that I could have supported myself, let alone my mother, was inconceivable' (*Important*, pp.68-69). As far as

her mother was concerned, there were only two possible careers for Pamela, those with which she herself was familiar: her daughter could be an actress, or a secretary. With first-hand knowledge of how unlikely financial success on the stage would be, Amy had to abandon her first ambition for her daughter, and the latter occupation was chosen. Pamela seemed to regard this decision as inevitable, although towards the end of her life, after a visit to the National Youth Theatre, she was to wonder whether, had the latter 'excellent institution' been founded during her girlhood, it might have changed the path of her life. 'I never doubt', she wrote, 'that I should have had a fine acting career, if migraines hadn't stopped me during all those terrible years.'

Amy, however, was determined that her daughter should attend a 'good' secretarial college, rather than the local technical college, and despite the strain on her resources, enrolled her on a six-month course at the smart Triangle Secretarial College in South Molton Street, Mayfair. Pamela fictionalised this episode in *An Impossible Marriage*, although in this book, Christine's mother has died before she left school. Nevertheless, the account would seem consistent with Amy's aspirations for her daughter:

It had been my mother's desire that eighty pounds of her insurance money should go to training me at a really good secretarial college, where I should meet the right kind of girl, and perhaps go straight into a really high-class post. If she had to see me as a secretary at all [...], then it was as something she called a 'Social Secretary', one who sent and accepted invitations for a duchess, and did the flowers. (*Marriage*, pp.30-31)

There is no evidence in her diaries that Pamela harboured resentment about being denied higher education. Indeed, she later said: 'I believe that, to a creative writer, a university education would have been nothing but a hindrance. A course in Eng. Lit. has rotted many a promising writer. It is only as a critic that I should have welcomed it' (*Important*, p.83).

Nonetheless, it seems extraordinary that, within thirty years of her leaving school, in the booklet compiled to commemorate the first fifty years of her *alma mater*, Pamela is listed as one of their most distinguished alumnae, as follows:

Pamela Hansford Johnson (Lady Snow) – novels and criticism, broadcaster, on regular panel of *The Critics* and on *B.B.C. Brains Trust*.

She would have many obstacles to overcome in those thirty years.

CHAPTER 2

Aut Inveniam Viam, Aut Faciam

THE TITLE of this chapter is a Latin motto, attributed to Hannibal, the English translation of which is: 'I will either find out a way or make one'. Pamela copied this onto the flyleaf of all the diaries which she kept, with some exceptions to be explained later, throughout her life. The earliest still in existence is for 1929 and covers her final two terms of school, and the first few months of her secretarial training. Her diaries for 1930 and 1932 have not been preserved, but it is possible to piece together the missing years from the 1931 diary and the reminiscences in her memoir. In the beginning, she used the year's Boots Home Diary, which measured 8" x 5", with a week over a two page-spread. Her remarks are necessarily therefore brief and factual; the language she used is often slangy, and one can safely say that her early diaries were not written with a view to future publication. Later, when established as a novelist, she used day-to-a-page diaries, and later still, notebooks rather than diaries, and therefore could write at greater length on matters of importance to her. It will be seen that she did occasionally express ambivalent feelings with regard to the possibility of a future biographer reading her entries, but the view of her family is that she would have left instructions for her diaries to be destroyed had she not wanted her story to be told.¹

The general picture of Pamela gleaned from the early diaries is that of a popular and talented adolescent, yet she frequently mentioned feeling depressed, or, in a contemporary slang expression, 'pipped'. This was generally occasioned by her difficult home life. Her mother, grandmother and aunt were constantly warring: typical entries record "atmosphere pea-soup", 'grannie truculentissimo [...] battle royal all day', 'simply appalling upset with Kalie before bed – hysterics &

all the rest of it'. But, in the lulls between confrontations, her mother managed to welcome her daughter's friends to their home. Pamela had inherited the good looks of the Howson branch of the family, and Amy, her daughter later wrote, 'was, in some respects, a wise woman':

So that I should not sneak off to meet boys round street corners, as she (fearing grandfather) had done, she kept, from the day I was fifteen, open house for the boys and girls I cared to invite. These were the dancing days: we rolled back the carpet in our pleasant semi-basement sitting-room and danced for hours. We then drank tea and ate my mother's special and much appreciated treat, called for for many years after that – of bread pudding, full of currants and spice, hot from the oven. (*Important*, p.79)

In *An Impossible Marriage*, Christine's mother had similarly insisted on a weekly open house, which had proved to be a good thing 'for she had an excellent eye to the weeding-out of undesirables'. Christine's friends, like Pamela's, were 'the local ones of my childhood, girls I had known at school, boys from the grammar school' (*Marriage*, p.31). Pam's closest female friends were Babs Freeman, and Dora 'Dick' Turbin (the nickname presumably being a pun on Dick Turpin). Her first serious boyfriend was Jack Davies; at the age of fifteen, she wrote a long, romantic poem about a visit they had made together to her aunt's house on the Thames. They had found an island they could reach across stepping-stones, 'our Paradise', she called it:

The glory of it! . . . with the long white clouds,
 The humming river, and the spiny grass!
 Then after tea, can you forget the hours
 Spent in the twilight, by the loving fire,
 You playing for my singing?

Pamela's circle also included several other boys, with whom she had more or less platonic friendships, and with whom she kept in touch for a number of years. The longest lasting of these friendships was with a young man called Teddy Lamerton. Amy had no qualms about the mixed parties at home, but became nervous when the time came for Pamela to go out to dances; in particular, her daughter fondly remembered, she worried about 'my spectacularly good-looking friend, Teddy', because he had been brought up in Malaya, 'and she

had a strange fear that he would slay me with a *kris*, and leave me in some awesome hiding-place on Wimbledon Common'. 'A sillier fear could not be imagined,' Pamela commented, 'Teddy was the soul of gentleness' (*Important*, p.115).

Writing of that time, she acknowledged that the gatherings in the basement did lead to 'romantic attachments', but continued that:

in those days, for boys and girls of our middle-class upbringing, these were only expressed in flirtation and in surreptitious kisses in the hallway. [...] No one went to bed with anyone else, nor would have thought of such a thing. (If anyone did so, he or she kept it dark.) No one suggested to us that otherwise we would be frustrated, would wither on the vine.' (*Important*, pp.79-80)

Significantly, in addition to their passion for dancing, they had been, she said, 'on the whole, a literary set'. One of them, who appears as a character in *An Impossible Marriage*, was nicknamed 'Take Plato', as he would frequently start a sentence with those two words. Her friends expanded her range of reading; they shared constant new discoveries:

Someone had found out Dostoevsky, someone Liam Flaherty, someone Nietzsche, I think this was 'Take Plato'. And one day, Teddy burst in, full of excitement, to tell us of a novel called *Look Homeward Angel* by Thomas Wolfe. (*Important*, p.80)

Pamela wrote in that year's diary: 'A wonderful book – I don't know when I have been so deeply moved by any novel.' The influence of the novel on Pamela did not diminish over the years; it can be sensed in her first novel, and would lead her much later to write a critical study of the author.²

Her own literary discoveries were prodigious, as revealed in the lists of 'Books Read' on the flyleaves of her early diaries. In 1929, she listed only 'favourite books' read that year, with a preliminary comment: 'Shakespeare head & front first of course'. In the early part of the year, the influence of the school syllabus was still in evidence. She was reading Webster, Jonson, Kipling, Victor Hugo, and re-reading *Jane Eyre*, commenting about the latter: 'Favourite now & always'. Having left school that year, presumably her choice was then subject to the availability of books in the public library (she does not mention being a subscriber at Boots Booklovers Library, or any similar private

lending library). But the books she was able to borrow bear testimony to that period having been a golden era for public libraries. She read recently published novels by British authors – among them, Michael Arlen, Clemence Dane, Philip Gibbs – and for light relief, P.G. Wodehouse, and several Father Brown detective stories by G.K. Chesterton (the latter genre being a regular favourite, which would result in her collaboration with her first husband in the writing of, it has to be said, less successful whodunnits). She was also able to widen her reading with past classics, as well as with books by American authors in addition to Thomas Wolfe, including four novels by Theodore Dreiser, and with works by European writers, including Stefan Zweig, Erich Maria Remarque, and Lion Feuchtwanger.

In the 1931 diary, despite by then working full-time, she listed a total of 90 books (nearly two a week), and included brief critical assessments, many of them shrewd, despite her self-deprecating preamble: ‘These are my own personal comments & are doubtless all wrong.’ She appended asterisks to recommended books, across all genres, from humour (*1066 And All That* was the ‘Funniest book ever’); through detective stories (an Agatha Christie omnibus had been ‘Gloriously absorbing – enjoyed every moment of it’); to novels by D.H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, Robert Graves, and Colette, among others, which have entered the literary canon. She was, in general, open-minded about sexual content, though occasionally mentioned reprovingly that a book had been unnecessarily ‘grubby’. A similar criticism was not levelled by her at *Look Homeward Angel*, despite the novel’s frequent and explicit descriptions of the hero’s developing awareness of sexuality. ‘Young men and women between seventeen and twenty-three years of age’, she would later write, ‘felt that in some obscure way Wolfe was their spokesman [...]. His lyricism was the expression of their own longing to put into words the wonder and strangeness of coming out of childhood.’³

However, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* provoked a violent reaction, albeit mingled with appreciation of the book’s aesthetic qualities:

Intolerably moving plea for a dreadful cause. Beautiful and inoffensive up to about two-thirds of the book, and I couldn’t understand why it was banned, but the last part was dreadful and repulsive, almost beyond belief. The last paragraph superb. Should be read gravely and carefully.

While this might appear to be a standard *petit bourgeois* response, it might also have been occasioned by a suppressed memory: a note in the margin of her 1929 diary during her last term at school read: 'About this time, I was having an affair with a dame. The least said the better.' (This was almost certainly no more than a schoolgirl crush.) It is elsewhere proof of her judgment that the majority of the non-asterisked books, and those about which she is most scathing, have not survived. She dismissed *The Crucible* by an anonymous author as: 'The worst rubbish of the year. APPALLING nonsense', and this book cannot be traced in any library catalogue. Others she simply called 'bunk', or, in one case, 'dull, dull, dull'.

She had by now become ambivalent about her attendance at church, though she still went frequently. One Sunday in March 1929, she wrote in her diary: 'Church this morning & communion; very beautiful. I felt much "gooder".' But a few weeks later, on Easter Sunday, the entry reads: 'Went to church in morning & was very bored which makes me miserable as I hate to feel I am not blessed on a Sunday.' By 1931, her visits to church were even more sporadic. She went far more regularly to the cinema. Her mother, possibly through her former theatrical connections, was able to get free tickets for trade shows. Pamela did not list these as she did with regard to books read, but frequently mentions such visits in her diary. Even in 1929, many of the films she saw were still silent. A rare visit to a 'talkie' at one of the splendid new 'picture palaces' was an event: 'Went with Teddy to very good "Talkie" at the Regal, a very lovely, if ornate, cinema.' Pamela's two favourite actors, John Barrymore and Greta Garbo, were fortunately among the few silent film stars able to make the transition to talking pictures. Other regular pastimes included long walks around Clapham Common, baking cakes, embroidering 'fancy work', making small woodwork items, giving piano lessons, and enjoying ice-cream sundaes at Lyons Corner House. She also was evidently a proficient artist, and was commissioned to design a dust-jacket for a book, *The Sloping Garden*, by Phyllis Austin, which was published by Collins. Phyllis Austin seems to have been a friend, or possibly a client of her mother's, but Pamela was delighted to receive a fee of four guineas.

In her penultimate term at school, she was chosen to be the chief character in a one-act play, *St. Simeon Stylites*, by Francis Sladen Smith,

which was to be entered for a drama competition. She had to make her own costume, with her mother's help, and they 'evolved something quite wonderful out of an old sheet!' She then tried on the dress and make-up, '& scared the cat into fits'. She thought that the first performance went really well, despite 'a good deal of prompting', and the following day heard that they had got through to the final in April, which would entail an evening performance 'thrown open to the public, so that will be jolly nice'. The day of the final was, she recorded, 'a Red Letter Day'. *St. Simeon Stylites* won the competition, and Pamela's performance was singled out by one of the judges to have been 'a splendid performance'. 'I got so worked up,' she said, 'that I was streaming tears when I came off the stage.'

The play was the highlight of her last year at school. Despite hearing that she had, as usual, been top in her English exams, she wrote that, though pleased, she had 'lost much interest in things scholastic!' She bought a bicycle from a schoolfriend for 7/6d., but the family reaction was 'so appalling that I shall have to sell it, though it was one of my dreams to have one'. As ever, she did not blame her mother for this opposition. When she mentioned her mother, it was always with affection and admiration, as on her final Sports Day at Clapham County School: 'Went to Sports with Mother & showed her off. She looked much the prettiest woman there.' Despite her later tributes to the school and its headmistress, Pamela's entry on her final day betrayed no sadness at leaving. She wrote: 'Left school for ever. HALLELUJAH! Very exciting morning: signed 150 autograph albums, etc. Lots of handshakes and goodbyes.'

Earlier that year, Pamela's relationship with Jack Davies had been the cause of several family disagreements. Her unmarried aunt Kalie was living with them at that time, and disapproved of the degree of latitude her sister allowed her niece. In May, Pamela wrote of 'A terrible horrible row – Mother & Kalie – in which Mother seems to have been temporarily vanquished – and our liberty with Jack curtailed.' Quite why Kalie was in general allowed to dictate terms with regard to the family ménage is uncertain, but it would seem that Amy could not withstand her sister's tantrums. However, a few weeks later, an ecstatic Pamela wrote: 'KALIE CONSENTED to let Jack stop 4 days with us. Jubilate.' On the Whitsun Bank Holiday, Pamela's entry was lyrical: 'Dream Day. Just wonderful. Jack & I to

Wimbledon till 5.30. It was all green & gold. One of those idylls that only occur once in a blue moon.'

The relationship with Jack became doomed when he revealed that he had theatrical ambitions. She wrote solemnly at the end of June:

Today has been a very sad milestone in my life. Jack seemed very funny all day. I enquired why & he told me he was crazy to go on the stage & was considering a job there. I have always told him that if he did, it was goodbye to me forever. I sent him away.

Presumably, it was the knowledge of the insecurity of an actor's life, dinned into her by her mother, which swayed her; her concerns about the financial stability of her suitors were also to blight subsequent relationships. However, she bounced back quite quickly from 'utter misery'. She rarely went for more than a few weeks without a boyfriend, and soon after Jack's dismissal, went to the cinema, and, as she put it, 'clicked with an artisan bloke!' Doubtless, she realised that neither Amy nor Kalie would have approved of such a suitor, as nothing more was heard of him.

A longer lasting relationship resulted from a summer holiday with her mother in Bruges. For the first week, she was an assiduous tourist, visiting the Cathedral, museums and churches, seeing 'Memlings and some fine van Eycks'. She rowed her mother on 'a lovely journey down the canal', passing 'little cottages on one side & willows on the other, & an old château', by which they moored. This memory would inspire a significant episode in the acclaimed first novel of her 'Helena trilogy', *Too Dear for My Possessing* (1940). She rejoiced in the mediaeval buildings, the picturesque townscapes, and canal scenes, and spent much time sketching and composing poetry about them.

At the beginning of their second week, she was watching a religious procession when she realized that she was being 'tracked in most flagrant style' by 'a darling ginger-headed man'. He followed her around for the next two days, but she was always accompanied by her mother; eventually Pamela went to an evening band concert on her own, and he seized the opportunity to get into conversation with her. She had decided because of the colour of his hair that he must be Scottish, and was calling him 'Ian' in her mind. He turned out to be Swedish, although his family lived in London, and to be called Oscar John

Swanson, but throughout their relationship, Pamela called him Ian, or when she was in fond mode, Iany. 'He seems to have a violent pash – Gawd knows why!!!', she confided to her diary that evening.

The following day, Pamela introduced him to her mother, and *he* evidently found favour with her, as for the rest of their stay, he accompanied wherever they went, and Pamela was able to indulge in her favourite pastime, dancing with him at the Terrasse Tea Rooms. On the morning of the day before she and her mother were to leave, the two young people were for once left alone to walk by the canal. There are three lines heavily deleted in her diary entry, and 'very pleasant' substituted; presumably there were *some* things she wished to keep hidden from Amy. They danced that evening (chaperoned by Mother), and said farewell at midnight. But that was not to be the last that they saw of 'Ian' in Belgium: 'When Mother & I arrived at Bruges station for the sad return journey, who should we see but Ian! He had sat up ALL night so that he "shouldn't fail to be early enough to see us off."'

Pamela and Ian started to see each other regularly in London, and she met his father, who, she said, was charming to her. However, the year was 1929, and contemporary events intrude in Pamela's diary for the first time. In September, she wrote that: 'Ian's father is at a great crisis on the Stock Exchange.' But, for the time being, nothing could quench her youthful enthusiasm for her new swain: 'Phone from Ian: Would I come to Tea Dance at Wimbledon Palais? What ho! So I went & we had a topping time.' He soon told Pamela that he loved her, and she was 'divinely happy'. He proposed, and she accepted, but immediately afterward, his father was served with a bankruptcy writ, and two days later she recorded that he was now 'ruined'. Any marriage plans had to be shelved.

She was not enjoying her secretarial training at the fashionable Triangle Secretarial College. Although she was not actively unhappy, Christine Jackson's time at a similar college must have been based on Pamela's own experience:

I made no friends there, for all the girls were richer than I and many of them were doing their training, not in order to earn a living, but to have some sort of career in their hands either to while away the time before they married or to maintain themselves if ever it became necessary for them to leave their future husbands. (*Marriage*, p.31)

Pamela found business practices dull, and struggled with shorthand; however, within two months, she was jubilant about having succeeded in a 50 words per minute test. Her typing proficiency would also stand her in good stead when she became a writer.

At that time, there were few, if any, secretarial employment agencies, and employers would apply to colleges for school-leavers if they had a vacancy. It was through the Triangle, therefore, that Pamela found her first, and virtually only, permanent job. Her mother recorded in the Progress Book: 'May 26 1930: First business position as shorthand-typist, secretarial work, at Central Hanover Bank and Trust Co., Regent Street, at £2 per week (3 days before 18th birthday).' The office was the West End branch of an American bank, where, as Pamela wrote later, 'very little banking was done; it was really designed for looking after the needs of travelling Americans' (*Important*, p.69).

Pamela's secretarial status at the bank was undermined by her arch-enemy, Mr Price, the under-manager, on whom the character, Mr Baynard, in *An Impossible Marriage*, was almost certainly based. Christine, the first-person narrator, dislikes Mr Baynard at once, not least 'because on my very first day [...], he robbed me of my fine title and labelled me, conclusively, "the Junior"'. Christine 'realised sensibly that I must resign myself to detesting Mr. Baynard with the same unemphatic and incurable detestation I should always have for spiders and east winds' (*Marriage*, pp.62-63). Typical entries in Pamela's diary recorded Mr. Price as being 'at his worst', 'in a real nasty mood', or 'in one of his obscene little tempers'. The office in the novel is identified as a travel agency, rather than a bank, but the business transacted, as with the real-life bank, was mainly on behalf of their American customers. This meant that they were exceedingly busy during the summer months, but Christine had little to do for the rest of the year, yet had to appear constantly occupied 'because of the faint chance that some official from the Other Side should arrive unexpectedly'. Pamela's diaries similarly frequently recorded entries like: 'Positively atrophied with inaction at office' during the winter. Christine is again clearly identified with her author, when she explains that she was selling poems regularly, and therefore she often welcomed the hiatus 'as my fury of creative energy was growing [...]. I could sit and scribble industriously hour by hour upon pink "second copy" paper' (*Marriage*, p.65).

Pamela's own creative energy was indeed mainly, like Christine's, directed at writing poetry, but not all of this was intended for publication, especially her 'Office Odes' (excerpts below) which caricature her colleagues, Price, Miss Cobban, the senior secretary, and Mr Nichols, the branch manager.

See Mr. Price with furrowed brow
 Engaged in speculating how
 To ship the wealthy Mrs. J.⁴
 Cosily back to USA.
 Miss Cobain grimly draws the dough
 From Mr. Mauger down below,
 And gets into an awful state
 If it is fifteen minutes late,
 And tells all calls on the 'phone
 That Mr. N. is NOT at home.

Her own frustration with the trivia of office life was also recorded:

Miss Johnson gets a little peeved
 When burdened with reports received:
 She's rather tired of putting scores
 Of dirty papers into drawers,
 But always seems distinctly better
 When she's allowed to TYPE A LETTER!

Pamela handed her wage packet over to her mother each week; in her memoir, she recorded that Amy then gave her back ten shillings 'for fares, food, and the ten cigarettes which I could not even then do without'. It was only on payday that she could afford a hot meal in a restaurant where she would have 'an omelette and chips, and a black-currant sponge pudding'. 'I should wish to say', she continued, 'that I have never enjoyed, in my life, any meals as much as I did those' (*Important*, p.69). She sought, therefore, ways in which to supplement her salary. Despite constantly submitting her prolific output of often excellent poems to various publications, she became inured to their rejection. She had also started to write short stories, but had not succeeded in having any of these published either. Eventually, she found a profitable, if aesthetically unsatisfying, sideline in writing doggerel verses about children for *Woman's Friend*. The first to be

published, in November 1930, celebrated the birth of ‘Princess Elizabeth’s Baby Sister’:

A jewel in a Royal crown
 Into the world a Princess came,
 And all the fairies, smiling down
 Upon her, sought to find a name.
 But they could think of nothing meet
 For one so small – so very sweet.
 Yet, as she glowed both soft and bright,
 Cuddled within her cradle-bower,
 They all agreed to name the sprite
 After a jewel and a flower;
 So, with one voice, the fairies chose
 To call her Margaret and Rose!

(Note: the name Margaret means a pearl.)

Later, the embarrassed poet scribbled ‘Awful’ alongside these verses in her scrapbook. Nevertheless, from 1930 to 1932, she was a regular contributor to the magazine, whose readers presumably enjoyed following the fortunes of baby Jennifer Jayne each week, from ‘Her First Smile’ to her first day at school, and later the scrapes of naughty but evidently lovable schoolboy Timothy, here making New Year ‘wesolushuns’:

‘WESOLVED: to be more careful and keep my jersey clean,
 An’ never rob the larder, ’cos that is *very* mean,
 To go to bed when *told* to, and put away my toys,
 An’ share my weekly pennies with all the other boys!’

I read the ‘wesolushuns’, and smiled at Timothy.
 ‘I hope you think they’re good ones,’ he whispered timidly.
 So I had to stoop and kiss him, and I answered (wouldn’t you?):
 ‘I think they’re simply *Splendid*, and I know you’ll keep them, too!’

Pamela would make no reference to these first published works later in life.

By the beginning of 1931, Pamela’s relationship of Ian Swanson was cooling. When he visited her on New Year’s Day, she ‘was in rather a nasty mood’, and ‘let the poor little soul see it’. She had begun to go

out with a more sophisticated young man, Frank Saunois, having met him and his brother, Charles, quite frequently when visiting her aunt in the Thames Valley. The brothers were part of the country club set in Laleham, and lived in Mayfair. Ned Skelton, the 'impossible' future husband of Christine Jackson, has a similar background, and in this passage, the author is almost certainly remembering her own entrancement with:

W.I. It had a magical sound in those days for the young living far beyond in the greater numerals: S.W. 1 1, N.W. 1 2, S.E. 1 4. Perhaps it still has. It meant an excitement, a dangling of jewels in the dusk, music and wine. It meant having enough money not to get up on the cold, sour mornings and catch the crowded bus.' (*Marriage*, pp.107-08)

On 2 January, in a diary entry adorned with exclamation marks, Pamela recorded that Frank had told her that 'he was terribly in love with her'. She lost no time in telling Ian that:

though I loved him (which I do) I wasn't in love with him. All went well & I thought he was taking it all right until he absolutely broke down as he was going. I felt dreadful. Long letter from Frank. Feel utterly wretched – realise I have been contemptible and deserve all I get. Can only pray for guidance.

Frank almost immediately asked her to marry him, and she told him that he must wait for her answer. However, only a week later, she yielded to his pressure to become engaged. She then found that the aura of luxury emanating from the W.I. address had been illusory. Frank sent her a long letter which was 'more or less a statement of financial condition', which she had found 'rather worrying'. Pamela had not initially realised that he was a hairdresser, probably not the occupation she would have envisaged for a future husband. He was then hoping to open his own salon, but he evidently did not have sufficient capital, and she was not altogether sympathetic. Christine Jackson, looking back, says that: 'We should not lightly condemn the snobberies of middle-class youth' (*Marriage*, p.106), and in February 1931, Christine's creator was exhibiting a stereotypical reaction to Frank's reluctance to seal their engagement with a ring. After several weeks of rows on the subject, alternating with days when she 'had never been so in love', Frank finally gave her a ring with 'a sapphire

surrounded by small diamonds', and she duly took huge pleasure in showing this off at the office the next day.

This aspect of her engagement having been satisfactorily resolved, Pamela could turn her attention to other pastimes. The Quondam Players, the amateur dramatic offshoot of her old school's alumnae association, were ambitiously staging George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, under her direction. 'I shall play Cleopatra,' she noted in her diary (as she probably had announced at the casting meeting), and she then spent an 'arduous evening' cutting the play to suit their requirements. After some travails, she was delighted to record that the play 'went simply MARVELLOUSLY! Raging success', and that it had won 'awfully good notices' in the local newspaper.

Pamela fretted a little about her mother's obvious dislike of Frank, which she could not understand, and also regretted that he did not get on well with her more intellectual friends. Further, while Pamela usually described him as 'precious', it would seem that he could also sometimes be sexually aggressive; her diary entries reflect her girlish alarm at Frank being 'so hard to manage' on one occasion, 'almost ungovernable' on another. Their relationship became still more volatile when he managed to open a hairdressing salon in Twickenham, since the enterprise was stressful, and would ultimately be unsuccessful. He was sometimes 'inexpressibly adorable', and sometimes intent on starting 'one of our vicious but enjoyable and innocuous rows'. On one occasion, when he had been in a 'peculiar mood', she gloomily wrote: 'Now I know why girls murder their lovers.'

That autumn, it wasn't just Frank whose business was failing. In an effort to stabilize the economy, Britain came off the Gold Standard, and the bank was besieged by clients. 'Terribly busy day at work', Pamela wrote, 'clients lined up against the counter, clamouring for money like a lot of tigers at feeding time.' Within a week, things were back to normal, and Pamela had an exciting day when: 'A very wealthy American called Santa (client) took me to lunch at the Monseigneur & made several most exotic proposals – mainly dishonourable!' (The Monseigneur was a newly opened restaurant and nightclub in Piccadilly, with a resident dance band led by the renowned bandleader Roy Fox.) When Christine Jackson is asked out to lunch by young James A. Dewey III, a millionaire client of the agency, she, with her 'heart beating', suggests the Monseigneur, and

then agonizes because her coat has a torn lining, which might attract the derision of the waiters. She therefore resolves to keep her coat on through lunch, despite the temperature being like 'that of a steam-room of a Turkish bath' (*Marriage*, pp.67-77). Pamela's daughter remembers her mother telling her a similar story, so again this episode was based on her own experience.

It was something of a come-down to return to Clapham and Frank, who seemed 'a bit of a pig' to Pamela that evening. The year drew to a close with no possibility of the young couple being able to set a date for their wedding. Pamela ended her diary for that year:

Darling F. over in evening to see New Year in. F. adorable as usual, and so ends 1931 – wonderful year for me, on account of my dear & much-loved Frank, and rotten for poor Mother on same account & because of a surplus of Grannie. No one's fault, but wretched for her. May I be married & she be living alone in 1932!

But 1932 turned out to be very much like 1931. Pamela was still dissatisfied at work, and frequently was sent by the Triangle for interviews, which proved unsuccessful, for other jobs. She had no further work published, and Frank's business was still in difficulties.

1933 began inauspiciously with family sadness. Despite the constant arguments between her mother and her grandmother (in which she had always taken her mother's side), Pamela was extremely upset when her grandmother became critically ill. On 5 January, she was allowed to return home from the office at 11 a.m., to sit with her grandmother for 'a good bit of day', and the following day, she 'worried about Grannie all day at work'. Helen Howson lingered for a further week in the house to which her Charlie had proudly brought her and their young family some forty years earlier, but died there on 14 January, 'very peacefully & mercifully'.

Pamela and Frank Saunio had now been engaged for two years, and were still, she said ironically, having 'jolly' evenings, 'talking over our miseries and our poverty'. His financial situation worsened as he fell into arrears with the rental of his business premises. Problems at the office continued; Mr. Price, she said, was 'a great cosmos of fidget', even 'a common, shouting little pipsqueak'. 'How I loathe that job,' she wailed, 'and no outlet.' All in all, it was hardly surprising that, in language unbecoming a craftsman with words (for she was still

writing poetry), she exploded with envious rage after a visit from an old friend. The afternoon had, she said, given her, 'the bleedin' 'ump. Gwen brought her baby to tea. Lovely little boy, but made me wretchedly jealous. Why should she have all the luck?'

But two months later, Pamela's luck would undergo drastic changes: she would begin to find the promised way from her motto, and this would result in her first steps on the ladder of literary fame – and she would fall in love with an *enfant terrible*.