Meade L. T.

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Содержание

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Chapter One
Great Refusal

"Nora, Nora! Where are you?" called a clear, girlish voice, and Cara Burt dashed headlong into a pretty bedroom all draped in white, where a tall girl was standing by an open window. "Nora!" she cried, "what are you doing up in your room at this hour, when we are all busy in the garden preparing our tableaux? Mrs Hazlitt says that she herself will recite 'A Dream of Fair Women,' and by unanimous consent you are to be Helen of Troy. Did any one ever suit the part so well? 'Divinely tall, and most divinely fair.' Why, what is the matter, Honora? Why have you that frown between your pretty brows, and why aren't you just delighted? There is not a girl in the school who does not envy you the part. Why are you staying here, all by yourself, instead of joining in the fun downstairs? It's a heavenly evening, and Mrs Hazlitt is in the best of humours, and we are all choosing our parts and our dresses for the grand scene. Oh, do come along, they are all calling you! There's that tiresome little Deborah Duke – Mrs Hazlitt's right hand, as we call her – shouting your name now, downstairs. Why *don't* you come; what is the matter?"

"There is this the matter!" said Honora Beverley, and she turned and flashed two dark brown eyes out of a marvellously fair face full at her companion. "I won't take the part of Helen of Troy; she was not a good woman, and I will have nothing to do with her. I will be Jephtha's daughter, or Iphigenia, or anything else you like, but I will not be Helen of Troy."

"Oh, how tiresome you are, Nora! What does the character of Helen matter? Besides, we are not supposed to know whether she is good or bad. Tennyson speaks of her – oh, so beautifully; and we have just to listen to his words, and the audience won't know, why should they? All you have to do is just to steal out of the dusky wood and stand for a minute with the limelight falling all over you, and then go back again. It's the simplest thing in the world, and there's no one else in the school who can take the part, for there's no one else tall enough, or fair enough. Now, don't be a goose; come along, this minute."

"It's just because I won't be a goose that I have determined not to act Helen of Troy," replied Honora. "Leave me alone, Cara; take the part yourself, if you wish."

"I?" said Cara, with a laugh. "Just look at me, and see if I should make a worthy Helen of Troy!"

Now, Cara was exceedingly dark, not to say sallow, and was slightly below middle height and also rather thickly built, and even Nora laughed when she saw how unsuited her friend would be to the part.

"Well, I won't be it, anyhow," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I don't want to take part in the tableaux, at all."

"Then you will disappoint Mrs Hazlitt very cruelly," said Cara, her voice changing. "Ah, and here comes Deborah. Dear old Deb! Now, Deborah, I am going to leave this naughty girl in your hands. She is the most obstreperous person in the entire school, and the most beloved, for that matter. Just say a few words of wisdom to her and bring her down within five minutes to join the rest of us in the garden. I will manage to make an excuse for her non-appearance until then."

As Cara spoke, she waved her hand lightly towards Nora, who was still standing by the open window, and then vanished from the room as quickly as she had entered it. After she had gone, there was a moment's silence.

Nora Beverley was close on seventeen years of age. She was practically the head girl of the school of Hazlitt Chase – so-called after its mistress, who was adored by her pupils and was one of the best headmistresses in England. Mrs Hazlitt possessed all the qualifications of a first-rate high-school mistress, with those gentle home attributes and that real understanding of the young, which is given to but few. She had married, and had lost her only child; husband and child had both been taken from her. But she did not mourn as one without hope. Her endeavour was to help girls to be good, and true, and noble in the best sense. Her education was, therefore, threefold, embracing body, mind, and soul. Her school was not an especially large one, never consisting of more than thirty girls, but the time spent at Hazlitt Chase was one unlikely to be forgotten by any of them in after life, so noble was the teaching, so systematic the complete training. Mrs Hazlitt knew quite well that, to make a school really valuable to her young scholars, she must be exceedingly careful with regard to the girls who came there. She admitted no girl within the school under the age of fourteen, and allowed no girl to stay after she had reached eighteen years of age. The girl who came need not necessarily belong to the aristocracy, but she must be a lady by birth, and must have brought from her former schools or teachers the very highest recommendations for honour, probity, and good living. She must, besides, be intellectual above the average. With those recommendations, Mrs Hazlitt – who happened to be exceedingly well off – made the money part a secondary consideration, taking many a girl for almost nominal fees, although, on the other hand, those who could pay were expected to do so generously.

So great, did the reputation of this school become that girls' names were on the books often for years before they were old enough to be admitted, and, in after years, to have belonged to that select academic group who walked the old cloisters at Hazlitt Chase and played happily in the ancient grounds was in itself a distinction.

It was now early in June. The school would break-up in about five weeks – for Mrs Hazlitt never kept to the usual high-school dates – and all the girls were deeply interested in those guests who were to assemble to witness the distribution of prizes, to see an old play of the time of Queen Elizabeth acted in the Elizabethan garden, and, in especial, to behold the tableaux of that masterpiece of Tennyson – "A Dream of Fair Women."

Mrs Hazlitt was remarkable for her gifts as a reciter, and had arranged to tell the story herself in Tennyson's immortal words and to allow those girls who were best suited to the parts to appear in the tableaux during the recitation.

By common consent, to Nora Beverley was assigned the part of Helen of Troy. Nora had been at the school almost since she was fourteen, and had grown up in its midst a gentle, reserved, dignified girl, who never gave her heart especially to any one particular person, but was admired and respected by all. She was clever, without being ingenious; very beautiful in appearance, and was known to be rich.

Cara Burt was supposed to be her special friend, and was sent to her now on this occasion to desire her to come at once to Mrs Hazlitt, who was seated in the old Elizabethan garden, and was choosing the different girls who were to take part in the coming tableaux. Cara returned somewhat slowly up the box walk and stood before Mrs Hazlitt with downcast eyes.

"Well," said that good lady; "and where is Honora? You were some time away, Cara; why has she not come with you?"

"I don't know whether she will come at all," said Cara. "She seems very – I don't mean undecided, but decided against taking the part."

A swift red passed over Mrs Hazlitt's cheeks. She was evidently quite unaccustomed to the slightest form of insubordination.

"Did you tell Nora that I desired her to be present?" was her remark.

"Yes – of course I did, Mrs Hazlitt. Oh, may I sit near you, Mary?"

Cara seated herself cosily beside Mary L'Estrange.

"I told her, Mrs Hazlitt, that you wanted her immediately, and where we were all to be found, and that she was to be Helen of Troy."

"Well – and – ?" said Mrs Hazlitt.

"She said she did not want to be Helen of Troy – that Helen of Troy was a wicked woman, and that she would not take the part."

Again the colour swept across Mrs Hazlitt's face. "We must regard Helen as visionary," she said, "a vision of womanly beauty. There is no one in the school who can take her, except Honora, but I override no one's scruples. I presume, however, that she will be gracious enough to give me an answer."

The headmistress was too calm ever to allow her real feelings to be seen, but the girls who knew her well, and who clustered round her now in pretty groups, watched her face with anxiety. Jephtha's daughter did not wish to be deprived of her part, nor did Cleopatra, nor did Fair Rosamond, nor did Iphigenia. How dreadful of Helen of Troy if she upset all the arrangements and made the pretty tableaux impossible!

"Oh, of course she will yield," said Mary L'Estrange. But Cara Burt shook her head.

"Nobody knows Honora well, do they?" she said, in a semi-whisper to her companion.

"Perhaps not," replied Mary; "and yet, she has been in the school for years."

"I consider her exceedingly conceited," remarked Cara again, dropping her voice. "But, oh! here comes Deborah – dear old Deborah – and no Honora, as I am alive! Now I wonder what is going to happen."

Deborah Duke was the English teacher and general factotum in the school. All the girls adored her. It was not necessary to worship her. She was the sort of person round whose neck you could hang, whose waist you could clasp, whose cheeks you could kiss, whom you could shake, if you liked, if she were in a bad humour – but, then, Deborah was never in a bad humour – whom you could go to in all sorts of troubles and get to intercede for you. She was plain, and dumpy, and freckled. Nevertheless, she was Deborah, the darling of the school. As to her knowledge of English, it is very much to be doubted whether it was specially extensive; but, at any rate, she knew how to coddle a girl who was not quite well and how to put a bad-tempered girl into a good humour, and how, on all and every occasion, to come between Mrs Hazlitt and the children whom she taught. The girls all owned that they could be afraid of Mrs Hazlitt, but of Deborah – never.

"Here you are, Deborah!" called out Cara. "Take this seat, won't you? There is plenty of room between Mary and me. Sit down, and tell us when Helen of Troy intends to put in her appearance."

"Why does not Honora Beverley come when I request her presence?" said Mrs Hazlitt, speaking in that tone of majesty which always impressed the girls.

"Honora is coming in one minute, Mrs Hazlitt, and she will explain matters to you herself. I am very sorry," continued poor little Deborah, whispering her latter remark to Mary and Cara. "She must have a bee in her bonnet; no one else could object to represent Tennyson's beautiful lines."

Just at that moment there came a slow step down the centre walk of the Elizabethan garden. Its edges of box, which were clipped very close and thick, slightly rustled as a white dress trailed against them, and then a very slim girl, with the fairest of fair faces and a head of thick and very pale golden hair stood in their midst. She was taller than all the other girls, and slimmer, and there was a wonderful darkness in her eyes. She was out of the common, for the soft brown of her eyes was rare to find in so fair a face.

"You have sent for me, Mrs Hazlitt," said Honora, "and I have come."

"You have been very slow in obeying my summons, Honora," said Mrs Hazlitt, in her gentlest tones.

"I am sorry," replied Nora.

She came a step nearer, and stood before her mistress. She slightly lowered her eyes. The girls, who looked on in extreme wonder and interest, hardly breathed while waiting for the conversation which they knew was about to ensue.

"I am very sorry, indeed," repeated Honora, "but I was detained. I had made up my own mind, but your messenger sought to unmake it."

"Well, Honora," said Mrs Hazlitt, briskly, "you know, dear, that we have decided, amongst the other interesting events of the eighth of July, that Tennyson's 'Dream of Fair Women' shall be recited by myself, and that, in order to give meaning and depth to the wonderful poem, I mean to present a series of tableaux to our guests. This will be nothing more nor less than that the 'fair women' who are represented in the poem shall appear just when their names are mentioned, and, surrounded by limelight and suitably dressed in character, shall give point to my recitation. By unanimous consent, you, Honora, are elected to take the part of Helen of Troy. I have sent for you, dear, to tell you this. I shall study the dress of the period and will write to-night to a friend of mine at the British Museum, in order to be sure of good and suitable costumes. You will have nothing to do but simply to stand before the audience for a few minutes. I think I have got all the other characters, and I have sent for you mainly to express my desire. You, Honora, will be Helen, you understand?"

"I understand what you wish," replied Honora.

There was a question in her voice, which caused the other girls to look at her attentively. Mrs Hazlitt paused; she did not speak at all for a minute; then she rose slowly.

"Being my scholar," she said then, "is but to know and to obey. You will be Helen of Troy. Now, girls, I think our pleasant meeting can come to an end, and it is supper time. Deborah, go into the house and see if supper is prepared in the north parlour. Good-night, girls; I may not see any of you again this evening." But, before Mrs Hazlitt could retire, Honora came a step forward and laid her hand on her arm.

"You are mistaken," she said. "You must listen. Another girl must be found to take the part of Helen of Troy, for I refuse to act."

The light was growing dim, for it was getting on to nine o'clock, but again the girls perceived that Mrs Hazlitt's cheek was flushed, and that her eyes looked almost angry.

"What do you mean?" she said, coldly.

"I don't like the character, and I won't appear in the tableau as the character, that is all."

"But, when I desire you to be the character – "

"I don't think you will force me against my conscience. This is a case of conscience: I will not be Helen of Troy."

"Do you quite know what you are saying?"

"Quite."

"She spoke to me very explicitly," said Deborah. "It is, I think, a matter of conscience."

"She gave me her mind, also," called out Cara. "Hush, Deborah. Cara; when it is time for you to speak, I will call upon you to do so. Do you clearly understand, Honora, what this means?"

"I don't know what it means, except that I will not be Helen of Troy."

"Then who is to be Helen of Troy?"

"Anybody who is sufficiently indifferent to take the part."

"I want to put things quite clearly before you, Honora. You understand that, on the day when the parents of my pupils arrive here to see their children, when relations and friends cluster in the old garden, it must be a member of the school who takes part in all the tableaux and all the different events."

"Yes, I understand that."

"Will you have the goodness to point out to me amongst my thirty girls who else could be Helen, 'divinely tall, and most divinely fair'?"

Honora's dark eyes seemed to sweep her companions for a moment. Then she said, slowly:

"That is for you to discover; not for me."

"It means this, then," said Mrs Hazlitt, very slowly. "That because you pretend to know more than I know, we are to give up the tableaux altogether, for there is no one else in the school to take the part."

Honora shrugged her shoulders.

"I am sorry," she said.

"You won't yield?"

"I will not."

"You have displeased me extremely. You talk of this as a case of conscience. I declare that it is nothing of the sort. Helen of Troy was the symbol of all that is beautiful in woman. Her name has come down through the ages because of her loveliness and gracious character. When a schoolgirl like you attempts to override her mistress' maturer judgment, she acts with wilfulness and ungraciousness, to say the least of it."

"I am sorry," said Honora.

She turned aside. There was a lump in her throat. After a minute, she continued:

"But I will not act Helen of Troy."

"That being the case, girls," said Mrs Hazlitt, who had quite resumed her usual calm of manner, "we must forego the tableaux – that is unless a suitable Helen of Troy can be found within twenty-four hours. I will now wish you good-night. I am disappointed in you, Honora, very much disappointed."

Chapter Two
For Helen of Troy

The excitement of the school knew no bounds. Hazlitt Chase was not a house divided against itself. All the girls loved all the other girls. Hitherto, there had never been a split in the camp. This was partly caused by the fact that there were no really very young girls in the school. A girl must have passed her fourteenth birthday before she was admitted. Thus it was easy to enlist the sympathies, to ensure the devotion of the young scholars. They worked for an aim; that aim was to please Mrs Hazlitt. She wanted to prepare them for the larger school of life. She took pains to assure them that the sole and real object of education was this. Mere accomplishments were nothing in her eyes, but she desired her girls to find a place among the good women of the future. They must not be slatternly; they must not be vain, worldly-minded, but they must be beautiful – that is, as beautiful as circumstances would permit. Each gift was to be polished like a weapon for use in the combat which lay before them; for the battle they had to fight was this: they had, in their day and generation, to resist the evil and choose the good.

Now, Mrs Hazlitt very wisely chose heroes and heroines from the past to set before her girls, and she felt very much annoyed now that Nora Beverley should object to take the part of Helen of Troy – Helen, who, belonging to her day and generation, had been much tried amongst beautiful women, badly treated, harshly used; sighed for, longed for, fought over, died for by thousands. That this Helen, so marvellous, so – in some senses of the word – divine, should be criticised by a mere schoolgirl and considered unworthy to be represented by her, even for a few minutes, was, to the headmistress, nothing short of ridiculous. Nevertheless, she was the last person to wound any one's conscience.

She retired to her private sitting-room, and then quite resolved to give up "A Dream of Fair Women," and to substitute some other tableaux for the pleasure of her guests.

Meanwhile, in the school, there was great excitement. Cleopatra, Jephtha's daughter, the gracious Queen Eleanor, and the other characters represented by Tennyson in that dim wood before the dawn, were exceedingly distressed at not being allowed to take their parts.

"I have written home about it, already," said Mary L'Estrange. "I have asked my father – who knows a great deal about antiquity, and the Greek story in particular – to send me sketches of the most suitable dress for Iphigenia. I have no scruples whatever in taking the part, and I cannot see why Nora should. Oh, Nora, there you are – won't you change your mind?"

"My mind is my own, and I won't alter it for any one living," said Nora. "Now, don't disturb me, please, Mary; I want to recite over the first six stanzas of 'In Memoriam' before I go to bed."

She began whispering to herself, a volume of Tennyson lying concealed in her lap. Mary shrugged her shoulders and went to another part of the school-room. Here was to be found a girl of the name of Penelope. She was a comparatively new comer, and had not entered the school until just before her sixteenth birthday. Some pressure had been brought to bear to secure her admission, and the girls were none of them sure whether they liked her or not. Mrs Hazlitt, however, took a good deal of notice of her, was specially kind to her, and often invited her to have supper with herself in the old summer parlour, where Queen Elizabeth was said, at one time, to have feasted.

Penelope Carlton was not at all a pretty girl, but she was fair, with very light blue eyes, and an insipid face. Now, as Cara and Mary looked at her, it seemed to dart simultaneously into both their brains that, rather than lose the tableaux altogether, they might persuade Penelope to take the part of Helen. Penelope was not especially an easily persuaded young woman; she was somewhat dour of temper, and could be very disagreeable when she liked. Honora was a universal favourite, but no one specially cared for Penelope. Some of her greatest friends were the younger girls in the school, over whom she seemed to have an uncanny influence.

"Listen, Penelope," said Mary, on this occasion. "You were in the arbour just now?"

"Yes," said Penelope; "I was."

"And you heard what Nora said?"

"Not being stone-deaf, I heard what she said," responded Penelope.

"You thought her, perhaps, a little goose?" said Cara. "Well," said Penelope, "I don't know that I specially applied that epithet to her. I suppose she had her reasons. I think, on the whole, I respected her. Few girls would give up the chance of taking the foremost position and looking remarkably pretty, just for the sake of a scruple."

"And such a scruple!" cried Cara. "For, of course, Helen was visionary – nothing else."

Penelope shrugged her shoulders.

"I have not studied the character," she said. "I have purposely avoided learning anything about Greek heroines. I know about Jephtha's daughter; for I happen to have read the Book of Judges; and I also know the story of our Queen Eleanor; for I was slapped so often by my governess when I was learning that part of English history that I'm not likely to forget it. The great Queen Eleanor and going to bed supperless are associated in my mind together. Well, what do you want, girls? 'A Dream of Fair Women' is at an end, is it not? I suppose we'll have something else – 'Blue Beard,' or scenes from 'Jane Eyre.' Oh dear – I wish there was not such a fuss about breaking-up day; you are all in such ludicrous spirits!"

"And are not you?" said Mary L'Estrange, colouring slightly.

"I?" said Penelope. "Why should I be? I stay on here all alone. Deborah sometimes stays with me, or sometimes it's Mademoiselle, or sometimes Fräulein. When it's Deborah, I get her to read foolish stories aloud to me by the yard. When it's Mademoiselle, she insists on chattering French to me, and, perforce, I learn a few phrases; and when it's Fräulein, I equally benefit by the German tongue. But you don't suppose it's anything but *triste*."

"You must long for the time when you will leave school," said Cara. "It is very selfish of me," she added, "but I have such delightful holidays, and I do look forward to them so. Picture to yourself a great place, and many brothers and sisters and cousins of all sorts and degrees, and uncles and aunts; and father and mother, and grandfather and grandmother; and great-grandfather and great-grandmother; and we take expeditions to one place and another every day; and sometimes great-grandfather hires a hotel by the sea and takes every one of us there for a week. That's my sort of holiday," continued Cara, "and the days fly, and when night comes I am so sleepy that they are all too short. Oh dear! but how I do run on! I am sorry for you, of course, Penelope."

"Don't be sorry," said Penelope; "I am not sorry for myself: I don't want the days to fly; for, when I have passed my eighteenth birthday, I must leave here and go somewhere to teach. It entirely depends on what sort of a character Mrs Hazlitt gives me whether I get a good position or not. But, up to the present, I have managed to please her, and I always take the little ones, who will do anything for me, off her hands. By the way, I have promised to play with Juliet and Agnes this evening. They ought to be in bed, but they are sitting up because I have promised them one wild game of hide-and-seek in the garden. I must go and fulfil my promise now."

As Penelope spoke, she rose.

"She's not so very short, after all," thought Cara. "But how plain she is," thought Mary.

"She's wonderfully fair, all things considered," pursued Cara, in her own mind. "She might do – she could never be like Honora, who is ideal – but she might do."

Aloud she said:

"You can't go to the children for a minute, or, rather, you had better let Deborah go, and tell them that you will play with them to-morrow night."

"What do you mean?"

Penelope's dull, pale blue eyes stared with an ugly sort of glimmer. Then they resumed their usual, apathetic expression.

"I don't like to break my word to children," she said. Mary jumped up and came towards her.

"You know what is happening," she said. "Our wonderful, beautiful tableaux are in danger of coming to grief. They will fall to the ground completely, unless we can get some girl belonging to the school to take the part of Helen."

"Well, Nora Beverley refuses; I don't know who else can do it."

"You can do it, Penelope."

"And you must!" exclaimed Mary. "Deborah, go and tell those silly children to get into bed."

A wave of astonished colour swept over Penelope Carlton's cheeks. She had been seated, but now she rose. She walked restlessly towards the window. There was within her breast undeveloped, but very strong, ambition. She saw herself quite truly, for she was not the sort of girl to be self-deceived. But she had always hoped that her opportunity might come. She had always known that she possessed possibilities. She was young; she was clever. That she was born plain, she admitted with scathing frankness. She called herself hideous and took little pains with her appearance. She hoped that her brain, however, might bring her laurels. She was strong, and young, and certainly clever. Against these advantages lay the disadvantages of extreme poverty, absolute friendlessness, and of a very plain face. There is, perhaps, no plainer woman than a very fair woman when she is plain, for she seems to have nothing to relieve the insipidity of her appearance. This was Penelope's case. But now, all of a sudden, a chance was given to her. She – Helen of Troy! It would be taking her out of her place. She would not be able to do the part at all. Nevertheless, there was such a thing as a make-up, and that could be employed in her behalf. She looked eagerly at the three girls and said, in a low voice:

"Do send Deborah to the children: I will play with them another night; and tell her to take them some chocolates from the school store and to give them my love, and let us go into the garden."

It took but a few minutes to fulfil all these requests, and Penelope, Mary, and Cara were soon pacing up and down on the front lawn. Other girls were also walking about in groups. The one subject of conversation was Tennyson's "Dream of Fair Women." It was so interesting, so beautiful, so suited to the school. It seemed so ridiculous and unreasonable of the one girl who could be Helen of Troy not to take the part.

"Well," said Mary, eagerly, to her companion – "will you, or will you not?"

"But I am so ugly," began Penelope.

"Yes – there is no doubt of it, you are very plain," said Cara.

"Poor and ugly," quoted Penelope, half under her breath. "What possible chance have I? Then I am not even tall; I am just fair – that is all."

"Your height can be magnified by your coming a little more forward," said Cara, "and, of course, Mrs Hazlitt manages the dresses. Yours will be severity itself, and it won't matter whether you have a good figure or not. Oh, surely you can do it; you have got the main characteristic – great fairness."

Penelope laughed.

"'A daughter of the gods'!" she quoted.

The other girls also laughed.

"Why do you want me to do this thing?" said Penelope, glancing around. "You have never taken any special notice of me until now. Why are you, all of a sudden, so – so – civil? I don't understand."

"We had best be frank," said Cara.

"Tea, of course, that is what I wish. In the world, no one will be frank; each person will disguise his or her true feelings; but at school one expects frankness. So say what you like."

"Well," said Cara, "we do not want to give up our own parts, and, next to Nora, you are the fairest girl in the school. In fact, all the others are mediocre, except the dark ones."

"I am very dark," said Mary, "and the part allotted to me is that of Jephtha's daughter."

"Who will be Fair Rosamond?" suddenly asked Penelope.

"Oh, we've got a girl for her – Annie Leicester. She is nothing remarkable, but can be done up for the occasion. But, you see, Helen comes first of all the fair women, and the lines about her are far more beautiful than about anybody else. Special pains must be taken with regard to her entrance on the scene. You will do all right: I don't pretend that you will be as good as Honora, but as she refuses – if you only would consent – "

"You want this very much, indeed," said Penelope, her eyes sparkling once again with that queer, by no means pleasant, light in them.

"You will consent," said Mary. "We have to let Mrs Hazlitt know within twenty-four hours, and the sooner she is acquainted with the fact that we have found a Helen of Troy, the better."

"Oh, I can't consent all in a hurry," replied Penelope. "I must take the night to think it over. This is exceedingly important to both of you – that I can see – and I have few, very few, chances. I must make the most of all that come in my way. I think I know just what you want. Good-night, girls."

She went slowly back into the house. Mary and Cara looked at each other.

"Do I like her?" said Cara, suddenly.

Mary gave a laugh.

"I detest her," she said. "I never could understand why she came amongst us. Honora Beverley has her cranks, but she is aboveboard, and honest to the core. I don't believe this girl is honest – I mean, I don't think, in her heart of hearts, she would mind a dishonourable action. From the very first she has been different from the rest of us: I often wish she had never come to the school."

"Why so?" asked Cara. "She doesn't interfere with you."

"But she interferes with Molly, my younger sister. Molly is devoted to her – most of the fourteen-year-old girls are. I can't imagine why a woman like Mrs Hazlitt should have such a girl in the school."

Cara laughed.

"We can't fathom Mrs Hazlitt," she remarked. "Of course, we love her, every one does; and there isn't such a school as ours in the length and breadth of England. Everything that is necessary for a girl's education is attended to, and yet there is no pressure, no over-study, no strain on the nerves. A girl who leaves Hazlitt Chase and goes into society, or to Newnham, or Girton, is equally well-fitted for the career which lies before her."

"Well, come in now," said Mary, sleepily. "I am dead tired. I only hope that ugly Penelope will take the part of Helen of Troy."

Chapter Three
A Startling Condition

During the night that followed, most of the girls at Hazlitt Chase slept soundly. The day through which they had just lived was conducive to healthy slumber. There was nothing to weigh on their young hearts. They were tired, healthily tired, from a judicious mixture of exercise and work – of mental interest, moral stimulus, and the best physical exercise.

But one girl lay awake all night. She tossed from side to side of her restless pillow. Now, this girl was not Honora Beverley, who, having clearly stated her mind, had felt no further compunction. She had a brother – a clergyman – to whom she was devoted, and she did not think that he would like her to act Helen of Troy. Be that as it may, she had made her decision, and would abide by it. She therefore, although sorry she had upset the arrangements of the school, and in particular had annoyed Mrs Hazlitt, slept the sleep of the just.

The girl who lay awake was Penelope Carlton.

Now, Penelope, being poorer than the others, was not in any way subjected on that account to severer rules or to poorer accommodation. Each girl in the old Chase had a bedroom of her own, and Penelope, who paid nothing a year, but who was taken altogether out of good will and kindness, had just as pretty a room as Honora Beverley, whose father paid two hundred and fifty pounds per annum for her education in this select establishment. No one in the school knew that Penelope was really taken out of a sort of charity. That would, indeed, have been to ruin the girl: so thought Mrs Hazlitt. Her room was small, but perfectly decorated, and although in winter there were dark red curtains to all the windows, and bright fires in the grates, and electric light to make the place bright and cheerful: yet in summer every schoolgirl's special apartment was draped in virgin white.

Penelope now lay down on as soft a bed as did her richer sisters, and had just as good a chance as they of peaceful slumber. But alack – and alas! she could not sleep! Penelope's mind was upset, and a possibility of doing a kindness to the one creature who in all the world she truly loved, flashed before her mind. Poor Penelope had no father, and no mother; but she had one sister, to whom she was devoted. This sister was as poor as herself. Her name was Brenda, and she had been a governess in different families for some years. She used to write to Penelope at least once a week, and her letters were always complaining of the hardships of her lot. She assured Penelope that the office of teacher was the most to be dreaded of any in the wide world, and again and again begged of her sister to think of some other mode of earning money. A pupil of Mrs Hazlitt's, however, had no other career open to her, and Penelope was resigned to her fate. She had eighteen more months to stay at Hazlitt Chase, and during that time she resolved to bring her remarkable talents – for such she felt them to be – well to the front.

Now, as she tossed from side to side of her bed, she recalled a letter she had received from Brenda that morning. In the letter, Brenda had assured her that if she could but find twenty pounds, she would be – as she expressed it – a made woman.

"I want exactly that sum," she represented, "to go with my pupils to the seaside. You don't know how terribly shabby my wardrobe is; I am simply in despair. A great deal hangs on this visit. There is a man whom I know and who, I believe, cares for me; and if I had twenty pounds to spend on beautifying my wardrobe, I might secure him, and so end the miseries of my present lot. I cannot help confiding in you, Penelope, although, of course, you can't help me. Oh, how I wish you could! for if I were once married, I might see about you, and get you to come and stay with me, and give you a chance in life, instead of continuing this odious teaching."

The letter rambled on for some time, as was the case with most of Brenda's epistles. But, in the postscript, it once again alluded to the subject of the needful twenty pounds.

"Oh, it is such a little sum," wrote Brenda, – "so easily acquired, so quickly spent. Why, my eldest pupil had far more than that spent on her wardrobe last spring, and yet she looks nothing in particular. Whereas I – well, dear – I am sorry to have to take all the good looks – but I flatter myself that I am a very pretty young person; and if I had only a few linen tennis skirts and jackets and a white frock for garden parties, and a few hats, ribbons, frills, etc, etc, why – I would do fine. But, oh dear – where's the use of worrying you! You can't get me the money, and there's no one else to do it. So I shall always be your pretty Brenda Carlton to the end of the chapter."

That special letter had arrived on the morning of the day when this story opens, and its main idea was so absolutely impossible to Penelope that she had not worried much about it. Brenda was always talking in that fashion – always demanding things she could not possibly get – always hoping against hope that her beauty would win her a good match in the matrimonial market. But now Penelope thought over the letter with very different feelings. If she could, by any possibility, gratify Brenda, she thought that happiness might not be unknown to her. She loved Brenda: she admired her very great beauty. She hated to see her shabbily dressed. She hated to think of her as going through insult and disagreeable times. She felt that, if she had the ordering of the world, she would shower riches and blessings and love and devotion on her sister, and be happy in her happiness. If ever she had golden dreams, the dreams turned in the direction of Brenda. If ever her talents brought forth fruit, the fruit should be for Brenda.

But all these things were for the future. She was now sixteen and a half years of age. She had been at Hazlitt Chase for exactly six months. She had not found any special niche in the school, but her teacher spoke fairly well of her, and she resolved to devote herself to those accomplishments which might make her valuable by-and-by, and not for a single instant to trouble her head about either moral or religious training.

"My place in this world is quite hard enough, and I cannot bother about any other," thought Penelope. "I must enjoy the present and get strong, and do right, because otherwise Mrs Hazlitt won't give me a character of any use to me: and then I must get the best salary I can and save money for Brenda. At least, we could spend our holidays together."

These were Penelope's thoughts until that evening. But now all was changed; for the daring idea had come into her head to ask Mary L'Estrange and Cara Burt to give her twenty pounds to send to her sister. They wanted her, Penelope, to take the part of Helen of Troy, and why should she not be rewarded for her pains?

"Their wishes are on no account because of me," thought the girl, "they are all for themselves, because that silly Mary thinks she will look well as Jephtha's daughter, and Cara as Iphigenia. Neither of them will look a bit well. There is only one striking-looking girl in the school, and that is Honora Beverley, and why she is not Helen is more than I can make out. This will be a horrid piece of work, but where's the good of sacrificing yourself for nothing? and poor old Brenda would be so pleased. I wonder if, whoever the present man is, he is really fond of her? But whether that is the case or not, I am sure that she wants the money, and she may as well have it. I was never up to much; but if I can help Brenda, I will fulfil some sort of destiny, anyway."

These thoughts were quite sufficient to keep Penelope awake until the early hours of the morning. Then she did drop asleep, and was not aroused until she heard Deborah's good-natured voice in her ears.

"Why – my dear Penelope," – she said – "didn't you hear the first bell? You will be late for prayers, unless you are very quick indeed."

Up jumped Penelope out of bed. A minute later she had plunged her head and face into a cold bath, and in an incredibly short space of time she had run downstairs and joined her companions just as they were trooping into the centre hall for prayers.

This hall was a great feature of Hazlitt Chase. It was quite one of the oldest parts of the house. The girls' dormitories were quite neat and fresh with every modern convenience, but the hall must

have stood in its present position for long centuries, and was the pride and delight of Mrs Hazlitt herself, and of all those girls who had any aesthetic tastes.

Prayers were read as usual that morning, and immediately afterwards the routine of the school began. The girls drifted away into their several classes. The special teachers who lived in the house performed their duties. The music masters and drawing masters, who came from some little distance, arrived in due course. Morning school passed like a flash. Then came early dinner, and then that delightful time known as "recess." It was during that period that Cara and Mary had resolved to ask Penelope Carlton to give her decision. Penelope knew perfectly well that they would approach her then. She had been, as she said, present in the arbour on the previous night, and knew that Mrs Hazlitt had made up her mind to give up the idea of Tennyson's "Dream of Fair Women," if a suitable Helen was not to be found within twenty-four hours. It was essential, therefore, for Penelope to declare her purpose during the recess.

She had by no means faltered in that purpose. During morning school she had worked rather better than usual, had pleased her teacher – as indeed she always did – by the correctness of her replies and the sort of quaint originality of her utterances.

She was a girl who by no means as yet had come to her full powers, but these powers were stirring within her, dimly perhaps, perhaps unworthily. But, nevertheless, they were most assuredly there, and in themselves they were of no mean order.

Penelope now walked slowly in the direction of the old Queen Anne parterre. This had not been touched since the days when that monarch held possession of the throne. It was a three-cornered, lozenge-like piece of ground, with the most lovely turf on it – that soft, very soft green turf which can only come after the lapse of ages. Mrs Hazlitt was very proud of the Queen Anne parterre, and never allowed the girls to walk on the turf, insisting on their keeping to the narrow gravel walk which ran round it. There were high, red brick walls to the parterre on three sides, but the fourth was open and led away into a dim forest of trees of all sorts and descriptions, and these trees made the place shady and comparatively cool, even on the hottest days.

Penelope, wearing a very shabby brown holland skirt and a white muslin blouse of at least three years of age, looked neither picturesque nor interesting as she strolled towards the parterre. She had not troubled herself to put on a hat. Her complexion was of the dull, fair sort which does not sunburn. She was destitute of any particle of colour; even her lips were pale; her eyes were of the lightest shade of blue; her eyelashes and eyebrows were also nearly white. As she walked along now, slightly hitching her shoulders, there came a whoop of delight from the younger children, and, amongst several others, Juliet L'Estrange leaped towards her.

"Here you are! I am so glad! Why did you not come to us last night? We'd got such a glorious place to hide in – you couldn't possibly have found us. What is the matter, Penelope? Does your head ache?"

"Penelope's head aches, I know it does," said Agnes, turning to her small companion as she spoke. "What is the matter, Penelope dear?"

"I am quite all right," replied Penelope; "but I can't talk to you just now, Juliet, for I've something important to say to your sister Mary, and also to say to Cara Burt."

"But I thought you hated the older girls," said Juliet, puckering her pretty brows in distress. "You have always belonged to us, and that was one reason why we loved you so much. You were always gay and bright and jolly with us. Why can't you play with us now?"

"Yes – why can't you?" asked Agnes. "It won't be a bit too hot to play hide-and-seek in the wood, and we have an hour and a half before we need go back to horrid lessons."

"Yes – aren't the lessons detestable?" said Penelope. One of her greatest powers amongst the younger girls was the manner in which she could force them to dislike their lessons, judging that there would be no surer way of making them her friends than by pretending to dislike the work they had

got to do. She thus bred a spirit of mischief in the school, which no one in the least suspected, not even the girls over whom she reigned supreme.

She said a few words now to Juliet L'Estrange, and then walked on to the entrance of the wood, where she felt certain she would find Mary and Cara waiting for her. She was right: they were there, and so also, to her surprise, were the other girls who were to take part in "A Dream of Fair Women."

It was arranged, after all, that only Helen of Troy, Iphigenia, Jephtha's daughter, Cleopatra, and Fair Rosamond were to act. Queen Eleanor was not essential, she might come in or not, as the mistress decided later on. But five principal actors there must be, and there stood four of them looking anxiously, full into Penelope Carlton's face. Annie Leicester was to take the part of Fair Rosamond. She was a thoroughly unremarkable looking girl, but had a certain willowy grace about her, and could put herself into graceful poses. The girl who was to take the part of Cleopatra was dark – almost swarthy. Her name was Susanna Salmi; and it needed but a glance to detect her Jewish origin. Her brow was very low; she had masses of thick, black hair, a large mouth, and a somewhat prominent chin. Her face, on the whole, was strong, and there were possibilities about her of future beauty, but that would greatly depend on whether she grew tall enough, and whether her buxom figure toned down to lines of beauty.

The four girls, such as they were, looked indeed in no way remarkable or suited to their parts. But what will not judicious make-up and limelight and due attention to artistic effect achieve? Mrs Hazlitt would not have despaired of the four, if only she had secured the coveted fifth. If the girl she wished to be Helen of Troy could only stand forth in her exquisite beauty in the midst of this group, the tableaux would be a marked success.

The girls now surrounded Penelope, each of them looking at her with fresh eyes. Hitherto, she had been quite unnoticed in the school. She was a nobody – a very plain, uninteresting, badly dressed creature. But now she was to be – in a measure – their deliverer; for they felt certain that under Mrs Hazlitt's clever manipulations she could be transformed into a Helen of Troy. They all surrounded her eagerly.

"So glad you've come!" said Annie Leicester. "Thought you would; of course, you're going to help us. Oh dear – how much fairer you look than any of the rest of us – you will make a great contrast to the rest of Tennyson's 'Fair Women'; won't she, Mary?"

Mary smiled.

"Penelope will do quite well," she said. "As Honora has been such a fool as to refuse to play, we must take the second-best. You have thought it all over, haven't you, Penelope, and you are going to yield?"

"Well," – said Penelope – "I have thought it over, and I am – "

"Oh, yes – dear creature!" said Cara. "You will yield, won't you? Say yes, at once – say that you will do what we wish. We can then find Mrs Hazlitt and tell her that her heroines will be forthcoming, and she can go forward with her arrangements. The date is not so very far off now, and of course there will be a great many rehearsals."

"Five pounds apiece," murmured Penelope to herself. She looked eagerly from one face to another. She had not been six months at the school without finding out that most of her companions were rich. They could each afford to gratify their special whim, even to the tune of a five-pound note; and even if they did not, why – it didn't matter: she would not play; the thing would fall to the ground. Of course, they would never repeat what she was going to say – that was the first point she must assure herself of.

"You are going to – yes – why don't you speak?" enquired Mary.

"Because I have something to say to you," replied Penelope. "You all want very much to take the different parts of these heroines, don't you?"

"Why, of course – "

"And I shall be a most lovely Cleopatra," said Susanna, in a gleeful tone. "I see myself in the dress, and mother will be delighted!"

She laughed: and her jet-black eyes twinkled merrily.

"Then *you* want to be Cleopatra?" said Penelope.

"Of course I do."

"And you, Mary, you want to be Jephtha's daughter?"

"Yes – of course."

"And you," she continued, turning to Cara, "you are equally desirous to be Iphigenia?"

"Of course – of course," replied Cara.

To each girl Penelope put the same question in turn. She saw eagerness in their eyes and strong desire in their whole manner. They wished to show themselves off. They wanted to appear in the wonderful dresses – to attract the attention of the crowd of spectators, to be petted and made much of afterwards by their fathers and mothers and relations generally. In short, that moment of their lives would be a golden one. Penelope remarked these feelings, which shone out of each pair of eyes, with intense satisfaction.

"But you could," she said, after a pause, "take the parts in some other tableaux. There are heaps of tableaux in English history and in the plays of Shakespeare. There's the 'Vicar of Wakefield,' too. You could be one of his daughters – Olivia, for instance, and the other girl – I am sure I forget her name."

"No, no – no!" said Mary. "I will be nothing, if I am not Jephtha's daughter."

"Very well. That is all I want to know. This, I take it, is the position." She moved a little further into the shade of the wood as she spoke. "One might almost think one was back again in that wood where Tennyson himself seemed to wander when he had his dream," she said, and her light blue eyes gave a curious glance – a flicker of feeling which did not often animate them.

She was quite still for a minute. Then she said, gravely:

"But the whole thing falls through, unless *I* am Helen of Troy?"

"Yes – but you *will* be – of course you will be; dear, dear Penelope!" said Mary L'Estrange.

"You never called me dear Penelope before," remarked Penelope, turning round at that moment and addressing Mary.

Mary had the grace to blush.

"I never especially knew you until now," she said, after an awkward pause.

"And you know me now," continued Penelope, who felt bitterness at that moment, "because you want to know me – because I can help you to fulfil a desire which, is very strong within you. Now, I wish to say quite plainly that I am in no way anxious to be Helen of Troy. Except by the mere accident of having a fair skin and light hair, I am as little like that beauty of ancient times as any one woman can be like another. I am in no sense an ideal Helen of Troy. Nevertheless, I know quite well that there is the rouge pot, and the eyes can be made to look darker, and the flash of the limelight may give animation to my face; and I can wear shoes with very high heels and come forward a little on the canvas of the picture. And so – all things considered – I may be made just presentable."

"As you will be – why, you will look quite beautiful," said Cara.

"And you ask me to do this for your sakes?"

"Well, of course – and for your own, too."

This remark was made by Annie Leicester, who did not know why, but who felt certain that something very disagreeable was coming.

"But, then, you see," continued Penelope, "it is by no means my wish to take any part in this tableau and, in short, I positively refuse to have anything whatever to do with your Helen of Troy, unless you make it worth my while to become one of the heroines in the tableaux." Penelope spoke very quietly now. Her whole soul was in her words. Was she not thinking of Brenda, and of what

might happen to Brenda should she succeed, and of the golden life that might be Brenda's were she to be clever enough to get these four stupid rich girls to accede to her request?

"I will tell you quite plainly," – she said – "there is no use beating about the bush. I want twenty pounds." They all backed away from her in amazement.

"I don't want it for myself, but for another. There are four of you here most anxious to take part in the tableaux. It would be perfectly easy for you four to get five pounds each from your respective parents, and to give me the money. On the day when I get the money, or when I receive your promise that you will pay it me, I will do whatever is necessary for the perfection of Helen's tableau, on the condition that you never breathe to a soul that I want that money, that on no future occasion do you bring it up to me, that you never blame me for having asked for it, nor enquire why I wanted it. For, girls, I, too, am ambitious, but not with your ambition; and I want just that sum of money, not to help myself, but another. For her sake, I will make a fool of myself on the day of the breaking-up, but I won't do it for any other reason. You can let me know whether you can manage this or not before the evening, for I understand that you are going to give Mrs Hazlitt your decision then. If you say no – there is an end of the matter, and we are no worse off than we were. If you say yes – why, I will do my very best for you – that is all. Good-bye, girls, for the present. I am going to walk in the wood with some of the children; Mary, your sister amongst them. Think of me what you like; I trust you not to tell on me. Good-bye, for the present."

Penelope disappeared in her untidy linen dress with her old-fashioned blouse and, walking down the path, was soon lost to view. The girls she had left behind stared at each other without speaking.

Chapter Four
Agreed

"If there ever was an extraordinary thing – " began Mary.

"Preposterous!" echoed Cara.

"Impossible!" said Annie.

"Five pounds, indeed, from me because she gets the very best part in the tableaux!" exclaimed Susanna. "Well, girls: this ought to settle us. We had best give up 'A Dream of Fair Women' on the spot."

Each girl looked at the other. Then, arm in arm, they began slowly to pace the wood.

Give it up? That meant a good deal. For had not Cara written home about it and told her father and mother what a delightful and original part she was taking? And had not Mary L'Estrange delighted her mother with the story? that she was to be – she – Mary – Jephtha's daughter? that noblest maid of ancient story. And had not Cara's brothers and sisters and father and mother and grandfather and grandmother and great-grandfather and great-grandmother all been interested at the thought of the girl appearing as Iphigenia in the play? For the thing had been settled, and nobody for a single moment had supposed that the ideal Helen of Troy would refuse to take her part.

Now, with great difficulty, they had found a possible Helen; but, lo – and behold! the little cat that she was – she meant to blackmail them! They must pay her for it. They must do it secretly; then she would act. All the rest of her life she would be a sort of little reptile, not worth touching. But, if they wanted her to help them on that crucial evening, they must each hand her a five-pound note. Oh, well – they could get it. Susanna's mother had never yet refused her darling anything in the way of money; and Cara's great-grandfather was rather pleased than otherwise when his favourite great-grandchild approached him on the subject of gold. And Mary L'Estrange was rich, too, and so was Annie Leicester. It was but to write a note each to that member of the family who was most easily gulled, and the money would be in Penelope's possession.

But then it was such a horrid thing to do! and they had to keep it a secret from Mrs Hazlitt; for Mrs Hazlitt would be furious, if she thought any girl in her school could act like Penelope, or could have confederates like Mary and Cara and Annie and Susanna.

"I, for one, will have nothing to do with it," repeated Cara, many times.

At first, as she uttered these words, her companions agreed with her, and considered that they, too, could not and would not speak on the subject to any of their relations. But, strange as it may seem, as the swift minutes of recess rolled by, they became silent – for each girl was, in her heart, composing the letter she would write to parent or guardian or great-grandfather, in order to secure the money.

"There is no doubt," said Susanna, at last, "that she is awfully clever and can throw herself into it, if she pleases. For Nora Beverley might look somewhat like a stick, but no one could ever accuse Penelope of looking like that. She is so awfully wicked, you know – that is the way I should describe her face – so wicked and so untamed, and – oh, there! if we gave her the money, she would do it, but I never did hear of a girl trying to blackmail her companions before."

The upshot of all this whispering and consultation, of all these pros and cons, was, that that evening, immediately after tea, a note was flung into Penelope Carlton's lap. It was written in the cipher employed by the school, and was to the effect that, if she chose to present herself as Helen of Troy, and if Mrs Hazlitt was willing to accept her as a substitute for Honora Beverley, she would receive four five-pound notes within a week from the present day.

"Dear old Brenda!" whispered Penelope to herself.

She crushed up the note and tore it into a thousand fragments and wrote a reply to it – also in cipher – in which she employed the one word: “Agreed.” This note found its way to Mary L’Estrange in the course of afternoon school.

In the evening Mrs Hazlitt again entered the arbour in the Elizabethan garden. She had quite given up the idea of Tennyson’s “Dream of Fair Women,” and had thought out two or three insignificant tableaux for her girls to represent. She was surprised, therefore, when the girls who had been already selected for the principal parts in the piece, namely: Mary, Cara, Annie, and Susanna, entered the arbour. They were accompanied by the fifth girl, who was no other than Penelope Carlton.

“Penelope, my dear – what are you doing here?” said Mrs Hazlitt, when she saw her pupil.

She did not like this pupil, although she tried to. But she was systematically just in all she did, and said, and thought; and would not for the world be unkind to the girl.

“But do listen, please, Mrs Hazlitt,” said Mary. “We have found Helen of Troy! Penelope will take the part.”

“Excuse me,” said Mrs Hazlitt. There was a tone of astonishment in her voice. She looked critically at the girl; then, taking her hand, drew her into the light. “You know quite well,” she said, after a pause, “that you are not suited to the part, Penelope Carlton, or, failing Honora, I should have asked you to undertake it.”

Penelope’s eyes had been lowered, but now she raised them and gave Mrs Hazlitt a quick glance. There was something beseeching and quite new in the expression of her light eyes. They seemed, just for the minute, to grow almost dark, and there was a passionate longing in them. Mrs Hazlitt had to confess to herself that she never saw Penelope with that expression before. The other girls stood around in an anxious group.

“We know she is not quite tall enough,” said Mary, then.

“Nor – nor quite beautiful enough,” said Susanna. “But there is rouge, and powder, and – oh, surely, it can be managed!”

“Can you feel within you, even for a minute or two, the true spirit of Helen of Troy?” said Mrs Hazlitt, then – “that divine woman who turned all men’s hearts?”

Penelope fidgeted and sighed. Mrs Hazlitt returned to the bower. She sat down; she was still holding Penelope’s hand, but was unconscious that she was doing so.

“I will speak quite freely to you, girls,” she said. “I should particularly like to present ‘A Dream of Fair Women’ to our audience on the eighth. There is nothing else that would please me quite so well. But I would rather it were not presented at all than that it were presented unworthily. The principal figure, and the most important, is that of Helen of Troy. The candidate who presents herself for the part has neither sufficient height nor beauty to undertake it. But what you say, Susanna, is quite true – that a great deal can be done by external aids, and, although I dislike artificial aids to beauty, yet on the stage they are necessary. We shall have our stage and our audience. Perhaps, Penelope, if you will come to me to-morrow, and will allow me to experiment a little on your face and figure, and put you into a suitable dress, I may be able to decide whether it will be worth while to go on with these tableaux. More I cannot say. I had intended to propose other tableaux, but, as you have appeared on the scene and offered yourself most unexpectedly, I will give you a chance. Girls, what do you say?”

“We can only say that we are delighted!” replied all four in a breath.

Mrs Hazlitt immediately afterwards left the arbour. Mary went up, and whispered in Penelope’s ears: “You mustn’t expect us to write for the money until it is decided whether you are to be Helen of Troy or not; but when once that is settled we will write immediately and get it for you.”

“And,” said Penelope, trembling a little – “you will let me feel assured that this transaction never transpires – never gets beyond ourselves. I am a poor girl, and I should be ruined, if it did.”

“We do it for ourselves as much as you. It would disgrace us as much as you,” said Mary. “Yes; I think you may rest quite assured.”

Chapter Five
Five Important Letters

On the following evening five girls might have been seen all busily employed writing to their respective friends. These girls were the five who had been elected to take the parts of the heroines in Tennyson's "Dream of Fair Women." Penelope Carlton was writing to her sister Brenda. She had passed her test sufficiently well to induce Mrs Hazlitt to alter her resolution and to determine that "A Dream of Fair Women" should be represented on the little stage in the old Elizabethan garden of Hazlitt Chase.

The girl was full of deficiencies, but she was also full of capabilities. There was, in short, a soul somewhere within her. Those light blue eyes of hers could at will darken and flash fire. Those insipid lips could curve into a smile which was almost dangerous. There was an extraordinary witchery about the face, which Mrs Hazlitt felt, although she had never noticed it before. She blamed herself for considering – at least for the time being – that in some respects Penelope Carlton outshone Honora Beverley. Honora, with her stately grace, her magnificent young physique, could never go down into the very depth of things as could this queer, this poor, this despised Penelope. Mrs Hazlitt decided to give in to the girls, and, that being decided, the necessary letters were written.

Penelope wrote briefly to her sister, but with decision:

> "Dearest Brenda: Don't ask me why I have done it, but accept the fact that your desires are accomplished. I have sunk very low for your sake, and I feel absolutely despicable; but the less you know of the why and the wherefore of my deed, the better. All that really concerns you is this: that within the next week or so you will receive twenty pounds which you can do exactly what you like with. You will owe this gift to your sister, who will have made herself – but no matter. You know, for I have told you already, how truly I love you. I don't think it would be quite frank not to say that I don't care for any one in all the world like you, Brenda. I am only sixteen, and you twenty-one – or is it twenty-two – and all my life I have adored you from the time when I used to cry because you were so beautiful and I so ugly, and from the time also when you used to take me in your arms and pet me, and kiss me and call me your own little girl.
>
> "It takes a great deal to get me to love anybody, but I do love you, Brenda, and I think I prove my love when I disgrace myself now in the school for your sake and do something which, if it were found out – but there – how nearly I trenched on ground which I must not touch in your presence; for if you knew, and if you were in the least worthy of what I think you, darling, you would not take the money. You would not, because you could not.
>
> "I hope whoever the man is who cares for you and who wants to see you in your fine dress and your pretty hat and ruffles, that he will not take the little affection you have for me away. But, even if that happens, my love for you is so true, and so very, very deep, that I think I would not change my purpose, even though I knew, by so doing, I should lose the little love you give me. For, Brenda, – I must say it now – I read you quite truly – you have got a lovely face and a beautiful manner and all people are attracted to you. But it is I – your sister – who have got the heart; and the one who has the heart suffers. I accept the position. I know quite well that no one will ever care for me in the way people will care for you; but so great is my love for you, that I am satisfied even to do what is wrong for your sake. It is all dreadful, but it can't be helped.

"Your affectionate sister, —
"Penelope Carlton."

Having finished her letter, Penelope addressed it to: Miss Brenda Carlton, c/o Rev. Josiah Amberley, The Rectory, Harroway; and, leaving her room, she ran with it into the hall, where it was deposited in the post box in sufficient time to go out with the evening letters.

The four girls who had promised to get the money for Penelope had been equally busy with their pens, and each had written the sort of letter which would assuredly bring back five pounds in its train. Cara Burt wrote briefly and decidedly. She wanted plenty of pocket money just now, and wouldn't darling great-grand-dad supply her? and would he promise to keep it dark from grandfather and grandmother and father and mother and from every one else at home, and just let it be a secret between his own Cara and himself; and if he did this, would not she reward him by a special walk, and a special button-hole, which she would make for him on the day of the break-up?

Cara knew her man to a nicety, and was assured of the dear little crisp five-pound note that arrived by return of post. Annie Leicester also wrote with calm assurance to her parents. She wanted a little extra money. She knew she had been a trifle extravagant with regard to chocolates and suchlike things. If she could have a five-pound note to see her safely to the end of term, it would put her into such excellent spirits that she could act Fair Rosamond to perfection. She wanted the money, and by return of post, and of course it would be forthcoming. Mary L'Estrange found more difficulty with her letter; for, although her people were rich, they were careful; but she managed to write such a letter as would make her mother deny herself a summer ruffle or some such luxury for the sake of supplying her little daughter with what that daughter considered necessary. Susanna was the only one who had any real difficulty in penning her letter.

Now, Susanna's people were much richer than the parents of any other girls in the school. They counted their money by tens of thousands; for Susanna's father was, in his way, a sort of Rothschild and he was fond of saying that everything he touched turned into gold. But if what he touched turned to gold, he was very fond of that said metal and did not at all like to part with it, and Susanna knew that it would be perfectly useless to apply to her mother on the subject, for Mrs Salmi had always to go to her husband for every penny she spent. Great lady as she supposed herself to be, she was not favoured with a separate banking account; but her bills were paid off with loud protestations by her lord and master. Susanna, however, was perhaps more anxious than the others to take the part of Cleopatra. She felt that she could do the swarthy queen of Egypt full justice. Her blood tingled at the thought of what her appearance would be, decked in the jewels which her own mother would lend her for the occasion. How her eyes would flash! how striking would be her appearance! Not for twenty-five five-pound notes would she give up so delightful a part.

Accordingly, she wrote straight to her father and, after many cogitations with herself, this was her letter:

"My Dear Old Dad: I am sending this straight to your office in the City, for I don't want the mum-mum to know anything about it. There are times when a girl has to apply straight to her dad to put things right for her.

"Now, dad, darling; I want five pounds. I am having a little speculation on my own account in the school. You know from whom I have inherited the spirit of speculation. It is from no one else than the dear dad himself – that wealthy delightful creature, who turns everything he touches into gold. Well, your own Susanna has inherited your peculiarities, and when I leave school, there is no saying but I may be able to give you some points. Anyhow, if you will trust me with the money and not say a single word about it to mummy, you may have it back again double, some day – I don't exactly say when. Don't refuse me, like a dear, for my heart is really set on this, or I would not apply to you; and what use is it to be the only daughter

of the richest dad in England if he can't grant me such a small whim? Five pounds, therefore, please, daddie mine, by return of post, and no questions asked.

"Your loving daughter, —

"Susanna.

"P.S. You and mother will be sure to come to Hazlitt Chase on the day of the break-up, and then I think you will see what will surprise you, namely: your own girl in a very prominent and exalted position. Breathe not this to the mummy, or to anybody, but be your Susanna's best of friends."

Susanna was decidedly under the impression that this letter would do the business, and she was right. For she had taken the great City merchant by surprise, and although most men would be shocked to think that a schoolgirl daughter was engaged in money speculations, this man only laughed and shook from side to side in his merriment and, opening a drawer on the spot, took a crisp five-pound note from a certain recess and popped it into an envelope with the words: "Go it, Susanna." The money reached Susanna accordingly by the first post on the following morning. The other girls received their five-pound notes at different times during the day, and Penelope was in possession of twenty pounds that very evening.

But now arose an unlooked-for and unexpected difficulty. Mrs Hazlitt was not so unobservant as her pupils supposed her to be. She trusted them, it is true; but she never absolutely gave them her full confidence. Their letters were supposed to be under her jurisdiction; but she was not the sort of woman to open a letter addressed to a parent or guardian, although at the same time she clearly gave the said guardians and parents to understand that, if necessity arose, she would feel obliged to open letters.

She had not opened any one of the five letters which left her house on a certain evening, but she did observe the excited appearance of Penelope, the change from dull apathy into watchfulness; the manner, too, in which Susanna absolutely neglected all her lessons, Mary L'Estrange's anxious face, Annie Leicester's want of appetite, and Cara Burt's headache. Cara Burt was, indeed, so overpowered that she could neither attend to her lessons, nor appear at the mid-day meal.

Now, all these symptoms – strange in themselves as only assailing the five girls who were to take part in "A Dream of Fair Women" – could not but arouse the headmistress' suspicions; but when they unaccountably vanished on the arrival of the post on the following morning, and when each girl seemed happy and relieved once more, Mrs Hazlitt felt sure that something had occurred which she ought to know about. She accordingly spoke to Deborah, who was her factotum in the school.

Deborah has been mentioned hitherto as the English governess. She held that position, but not in its entirety. It is true that she taught the young girls English history and literature, helped them with their spelling, and attended to their writing. But there was also a very special, highly educated woman to give lessons in English literature and English composition to all the elder girls, and, besides this, Mrs Hazlitt herself taught English as no one else could, for she was a profound scholar and had a mind of the highest order. Deborah, however, was indispensable for the simple reason that she was honest, exceedingly unselfish, and could do those thousand and one things for the girls which only a person who never thought of herself could achieve. Mrs Hazlitt, therefore, determined to speak to Deborah now on the subject of the girls.

It was the pleasant hour of recess. What a beautiful calm rested over the place! The sun shone forth from a cloudless sky; the trees were in their full summer green; there were shadow and sunlight intermingled all over the lovely old place. The house itself was so old and the walls so thick that great heat could never penetrate; and Mrs Hazlitt chose as her place of confidence her own tiny oak parlour where she sat when she wanted to rest and did not wish to be intruded upon.

"Deborah," she said on this occasion, "will you come with me into the parlour? I suppose the children are all right, and you need not trouble about them. That good-natured girl, Penelope Carlton, will look after them if you ask her."

"I don't know," replied Deborah; "she is up in her room writing. She said she had a special letter she wanted to write, but I have no doubt they won't get into any mischief. I will just go and talk to them for a minute and put them on their honour."

"Do, Deborah," said Mrs Hazlitt, "and then come back to me. Don't tell any one what you are specially doing; just come here; I shall be waiting for you."

The governess withdrew, to return in the course of a few minutes.

"It's all right," she said. "I went first of all to Penelope, but she seemed rather fluttered at being disturbed and said that she always did suppose that recess was at her own disposal. But the children will be quite good; they will play in the woods and keep out of the sunshine."

"Then that is all right," said Mrs Hazlitt. "And what is Penelope doing in her room, Deborah?"

"She is writing a letter."

"A letter?" said Mrs Hazlitt. "Did you see her writing one?"

"Oh, yes – at least I think so."

Deborah coloured, for she knew that Penelope had hastily put a sheet of paper over the letter when the English teacher had entered the bedroom. Deborah never would tell tales of the pupils whom she loved, nor did Mrs Hazlitt expect her to. Nevertheless, that good woman gazed now intently at the English governess.

"Deborah," she said, "I cannot help confiding in you. There is a spirit at present abroad in this school which I feel, without being able to differentiate. It is an unholy and a mischievous spirit and it has never been in our midst before. There are certain girls in the school who are acting in a sort of conspiracy. I cannot tell why, but I feel assured on that point, and I believe that the head of the conspiracy is no less a person than Penelope Carlton."

"Now, my dear Mrs Hazlitt," said Deborah Duke, "I never did hear you give way to such unchristian sentiments before. You will forgive me, my dear friend, my best friend – but why should you accuse poor little Penelope of anything so base?"

"I accuse her of nothing, but I have a feeling about her. I know for a fact that five letters left this house a couple of days ago – on the evening of the day when it was decided that Penelope was to take the part of Helen of Troy. I also know that five letters in reply were received this morning, and that they gave universal satisfaction. During the time of suspense between the departure of the letters and their replies four of my pupils were absolutely good for nothing – uneasy, incapable of work; in short, quite unlike themselves. It is my rule not to open my pupils' letters; nevertheless, I am full of suspicions, and my suspicions particularly centre round the girl who is to take the part of Helen of Troy. Why did she volunteer for the part? I can put up with her, but she is not suitable. Do you know anything about it, Deborah?"

"All I know is this," replied Deborah – "that Honora Beverley would not take the part because she was full of horror with regard to the character. I thought 'A Dream of Fair Women' was practically at an end when Penelope – of all people – came forward. I believe she was very much pressed by the other girls to do this. They thought of her because she is fair."

Mrs Hazlitt looked full at Miss Duke. After a minute, she said abruptly:

"You say that Penelope is at present writing a letter?"

"That is true."

"When she has finished it, she will drop it into the post box, will she not?"

"Yes; that is true also."

"I shall do something which I am not accustomed to doing, but I must do it for the sake of the school," said Mrs Hazlitt. "I shall open Penelope's letter before it goes, and acquaint myself with the contents."

Miss Duke gave a start.

"You will not do that," she said. "It would distress Penelope very much."

"She need never know. If the letter is straightforward and above board, nothing will occur. If the spirit of mischief – nay, more, of intrigue – is abroad, the sooner I can nip it in the bud, the better. I sent for you to consult you. I am within my rights in this matter. Don't say a word to any one. I think that is all."

"I am very much distressed," said Deborah. "I wish you would not do this thing."

"I have made up my mind, dear friend; we will not argue the point. I will read the contents of the letter, and it shall reach its destination if there is nothing in it. No harm will be done. If there is mischief in it, I shall at least know where I stand."

Deborah sighed profoundly and left the room.

Now, upstairs a girl, who had hastily finished a hasty scrawl and had thrust it into its envelope, was busily engaged putting on her hat and drawing some cotton gloves over her hands.

"I daren't put the letter into the post box," she said. "I wish Deborah hadn't come into my room; she saw quite well that I was writing. I must manage somehow to get to the village and will post the letter myself."

She flew downstairs. A minute later, she was out of doors. She looked swiftly round her; there was not a soul in sight. The children, who were her constant companions, were playing happily in the distant woods. The girls whom she trusted were in the Queen Anne parterre or in the Queen Elizabeth garden. All the world seemed still and sleepy. Penelope made a hasty calculation. Mrs Hazlitt's oak parlour looked out on the Queen Anne parterre. There was no one to see her. The village was a mile away; yes, she could get there; she would get there. By running fast she would accomplish this feat and yet be back just within time for afternoon school.

Outside Hazlitt Chase was just the reverse of peace and quietude. There was a wide and dusty road over which motors flew at intervals; and heavy carts, drawn, some by horses and some by oxen, toiled over the road; carriages, pony traps, governess carts also traversed the King's highway, and amongst them, flying in and out, ran a girl in a dusty brown holland dress, her fair face suffused by ugly colour, her eyes full of dust, her lips parched.

All in good time she reached the village and dropped the letter, which she had already stamped, into the post box. She was safe. She drew a long breath of relief. Nothing would induce the village postmistress to give up her letter; all was right now; Brenda would be happy to-morrow morning and she – she could perform her task with a light heart.

She had done a great deal for her beloved sitter. Deborah had given the whole show away by coming to visit her in her room. Penelope was quick enough, to be certain that there was something up, or the English teacher would not have come in looking so *distraite* and unlike herself. Deborah was the last person in the world ever to ask Penelope to take care of the younger children. Yes; it was all too plain; Mrs Hazlitt's suspicions were aroused. Well, they would never be verified, for the letter was posted. If only Penelope could get back in safety – could creep up to her own room without being observed, she might snap her fingers at the enemy; all would, all must be – well.

She returned to the school by the same dusty highway, entered by a back door, went to her room, threw herself on her bed for five minutes, then washed her face and hands and went downstairs for afternoon school. Not a soul had seen her go; not a soul had witnessed her return.

Mrs Hazlitt watched her as she took her place in class – her face flushed, her lips dry. Miss Duke raised a guilty and startled face when the girl – whose secret, if she had one, was so soon to be exposed – took her usual place and went through her usual tasks with that skill and ability which always characterised her. Mrs Hazlitt was more determined than ever to take steps to discover what she felt was wrong; but she looked in vain in the letter box. Childish productions from more than one member of the school were there, but there was no letter addressed to Miss Brenda Carlton – no letter of any sort in Penelope Carlton's upright and somewhat remarkable handwriting. What could have happened? Had the girl dared to go to that extreme of disobedience? Had she posted her letter herself?

Chapter Six
Preparations for the Visit

For a few days Mrs Hazlitt examined the post box, but there was no letter of any sort from Penelope. In the end, she was obliged to confess to Deborah that she had been – she supposed – quite mistaken in the girl.

"I am distressed about her," she said; "for she doesn't look well or happy. But there is no doubt that she has not written anything which I ought to see. Do not make yourself unhappy therefore, Deborah dear, but let us continue our usual pleasant life and trust that my suspicions have not been justified."

"Oh, I am certain they have not," said Deborah. "Meanwhile," continued Mrs Hazlitt, "we are exceedingly busy; I find the tableaux are going to be much better than I expected. The little plays too, and the garden of roses – an extravaganza – will be quite sweet. But I am really putting all my strength and energy into Tennyson's poem; I am only vexed that Honora Beverley cannot be Helen of Troy."

"But what do you think of the present Helen?" enquired Miss Duke.

"She is much more remarkable than I thought it possible she could be. I am most anxious to see her to-night, when we have a dress rehearsal and she will wear her costume for the first time. She is a queer girl, and not a happy one. I wonder what sort of creature that sister of hers is."

"By the way," said Miss Duke, "she came to me this morning with a petition. She wants to know if she may invite her sister to the performance. It seems that Miss Brenda Carlton could take an early train from where she is now staying and reach here in time for the day's festivities; and Penelope would take it as a great favour if she might sleep in her room that night."

"No," replied Mrs Hazlitt with decision. "That I do not allow. Were I to accede to Penelope's wish, the same request would be presented to me by each of my pupils. The girls will especially require their night's rest after the excitement of the day. I don't know anything about Miss Brenda, but I am quite willing to invite her here as Penelope's relation, only she cannot sleep in the house."

"I will speak to Penelope and tell her what you say," remarked Miss Duke.

She moved away rather sadly. She was fully convinced, in spite of herself, that there was something not quite right in the school, but not for worlds would she give hint to Mrs Hazlitt with regard to the matter.

She found Penelope, as usual, surrounded by some of the younger girls. She dismissed them with a playful word and then, taking her pupil's hand, led her into the oak parlour where such a serious conversation had taken place between herself and the headmistress.

"What in the world is it, Deborah?" said Penelope.

She had a sort of defiant manner in these days – quite different from her old way which, although languid, provokingly so at times, was at least downright and matter-of-fact.

"What is it?" she said. "Why are you so mysterious?"

"I thought you wanted your sister to come to see the tableaux."

"Oh, Brenda – yes, she says she will come; I heard from her only this morning. Is Mrs Hazlitt agreeable?"

"Quite agreeable."

"And may she share my room and bed?"

"That is just the point that I want to speak to you about, Penelope. She may not do so. Mrs Hazlitt's ideas on that subject are quite fixed and cannot by any possibility be altered. If your sister comes, we must find a room for her in the village."

"It doesn't much matter whether she comes or not," said Penelope, shrugging her shoulders. "I don't suppose she will care to go to the expense of a room in the village. She is very young too, and can't sleep alone at a hotel."

"But you would like her to see you as Helen of Troy?"

"Like it!" said Penelope – "yes, perhaps I should. I hate the whole thing as I never hated anything in all my life before, but it might be a sort of satisfaction to have Brenda there. I'd do a good deal – yes, a good deal for Brenda; but I don't think she will stay in the village."

"You want to write to her to-day about it, don't you?"

"I may as well write to-day. She is making her plans; she is going to the seaside with her pupils, but could come to me on her way. But don't let us fuss about it, please. I don't really – greatly care."

"But *I* care that you should have pleasure," said little Miss Duke. "You know well how much I care. Wait a second until I get the time-table."

She flew out of the room, returning in a few minutes with a Bradshaw. By dint of careful searching, she discovered that a train could be found which would take Miss Brenda Carlton back to her rectory about midnight on the day of the break-up. Penelope condescended to seem pleased.

"Thank you," she said, "I will let her know. She may not care to come, for I think her principal reason was to have a chat with me; but there is no saying. I will tell her the train, anyhow."

Penelope did write to Brenda, giving her full particulars with regard to the train.

> "My Dear Brenda," she wrote: "Your sleeping with me and having – as you express it – a cosy chat, is out of the question. Cause why: headmistress doesn't allow cosy chats between schoolgirls and their sisters. Reason for this: can't say – excites bad motives, in my opinion. Anyhow, if you want to see Helen of Troy in all her pristine splendour, you must take the train which leaves Harroway at nine in the morning; that will get you here by noon. You will have a hearty welcome and will mingle with the other guests, and I find there is a train back to Harroway at ten o'clock, which gets there sharp at twelve. Don't come if you don't want to: that's the best I can do for you.
>
> "Your affectionate sister, —
>
> "Penelope."

Now this letter reached Miss Brenda Carlton on a certain morning when she was pouring out very weak coffee for the small daughters of the Reverend Josiah Amberley. There were three Misses Amberley, and they wore about as commonplace young ladies as could be found in the length and breadth of England. Their manners were atrocious; their learning very nearly nil, and their power of self-control nowhere. Why Brenda Carlton, of all people under the sun, had been deputed governess to these three romps, must remain a puzzle to any thoughtful reader. But the Reverend Josiah was always pleased to see a pretty face; was always taken with a light and agreeable manner; and, knowing nothing whatever about the bringing up of children, was glad to find a girl who would undertake the duty for the small sum of thirty pounds per annum. This money Brenda Carlton received quarterly. She also had a month's holiday some time in the year – not in the summer, for that would be specially inconvenient to the Reverend Josiah, who wished his young people to enjoy the benefit of the sea breezes and could not possibly take them to any seaside resort himself.

He was a little sandy-haired man of over fifty years of age; devoted, after a fashion, to his work, and absolutely easy-going as regarded his establishment.

Mrs Amberley had died when Nina, the youngest of the three sisters, was five years old. Nina was now ten; Josephine, the next girl, was between eleven and twelve; and Brenda's eldest pupil, Fanchon – as for some extraordinary reason she was called – would soon be fourteen. The three sisters resembled their father. They were short in stature, thickset, with very sandy hair and small blue eyes. They had no special capabilities, nor any gifts which took them out of the ordinary line.

But they were all fond of Brenda, who could do with them exactly what she willed. She made them her confidantes, but taught them little or nothing.

On the day when she received her letter from Penelope, she continued to pour out the coffee until the whole family were supplied. Then she sat down, and deliberately read it. As she did so, three pairs of eyes were fixed on her face.

Nina, whose privilege it was always to sit near her governess, looked mysterious and full of mischief. The other girls showed by their faces that they were devoured by curiosity. But the Reverend Josiah required to be humoured. To talk nonsense or of such frivolities as dress in his presence was not to be thought of. Brenda had taught her pupils to respect his scruples in that matter. In reality, poor man, they did not exist; but she thought it well to keep her pupils in a certain awe of him – so she was fond of saying:

"As a clergyman, my dears, your father must condemn the dress that makes a woman look pretty; and if you talk about it in his presence, I shall never be able to get your nice frocks for our seaside jaunt, for he will not give me the money."

This was a terrible thought to the three Misses Amberley, and, in consequence, they seemed as innocent with regard to the muslins and chiffons and voile as though these materials did not exist.

The Reverend Josiah believed that dresses were divided into two categories: cotton dresses for the morning, and silk dresses for the afternoon. He had not the faintest idea that any other textures could be procured. It grieved him sometimes to think that his little daughters did not wear silk on those rare occasions when his parishioners came to visit him, but as he couldn't afford it, he did not give the matter another thought. Brenda read her letter, folded it up, and put it into her pocket. The Reverend Mr Amberley, having eaten an excellent meal, rose to leave the room. As he was doing so, Brenda raised her voice:

"I am very sorry to interrupt you, Mr Amberley, but can I see you presently in your study?"

The rector signified his assent to this proposition. He was always glad to have an interview with Miss Carlton, for he considered himself in rare luck to have such a nice stylish girl with his little orphans – as he was fond of calling them.

"I shall be in my study at eleven o'clock," he said, "and quite at your service, Miss Carlton."

Brenda smiled, showing her brilliant teeth and starry blue eyes, and the rector went away thinking what a dazzling creature she was, and how lucky it was for Fanchon and Josephine and Nina to have such a nice governess to instruct them.

"How my sainted wife – could she speak – would bless that girl!" was his thought. "How happy she makes my dear little ones, and how nice she always manages to look herself!"

"Now, please – please, Brenda!" said Nina, catching her governess by the sleeve the moment the door had closed behind the rector. "That letter – we want to know all about it."

"Yes, of course we do," said Josephine.

"Out with the news!" exclaimed Fanchon.

"There isn't a great deal of news to relate," replied Brenda. "I am invited to spend the eighth of July with my dear sister at that celebrated school, Hazlitt Chase. She has simply written me an itinerary of trains. I fear I shall have to leave here very early in the morning, and you – my dear *petites*– will be deprived of your governess for the entire day, for I shall not be home until midnight."

"Oh dear!" cried Nina. "We thought you were going to spend the night away!"

She looked slightly disappointed and glanced at her sisters.

"Any little fun on?" asked Brenda, interpreting the glances between the three according to her own sweet will.

"No, no – nothing in particular – nothing at all in particular; only we thought you would have so much to tell us when you came back again."

"I shall have a good deal to tell you. Do you know; that my wonderful young sister is to be Helen of Troy?"

"Whoever is she?" yawned Fanchon.

"Never heard of her, and never want to," cried Nina.

"Is she one of the dead-and-gones?" exclaimed Josephine. "I hate all dead-and-gones, don't you, girls?"

"Yes – loathe them!" exclaimed the other sisters.

Brenda laughed.

"Look here," she said. "I must have a special dress, and a very, very pretty one to go to Hazlitt Chase. I was thinking of getting a pale blue silk – "

"Blue – silk!" exclaimed all three.

"Silk, Brenda? But surely your money – I mean your salary, poor darling, doesn't run to that!" cried Nina, who had a more caressing way than her sisters.

"Whether my salary runs to it or not, I mean to get it," said Brenda – "a very pale shade and plenty of white lace with it, and a white lace scarf, such as is worn so much now, on my shoulders. Ah, your governess will look one of the prettiest girls at the fête, and won't you be pleased, *mes enfants*?"

Brenda scarcely knew a word of French, but was fond of interlarding her conversation with a few simple sentences. These had an excellent effect as far as the Reverend Josiah was concerned, but the girls had no respect for them, being well aware of the shallowness of their darling Brenda's pretensions with regard to the French tongue.

"Well," said Nina – "and how are you going to get the dress?"

"I am going now – in a few minutes – to see your father, and will ask him to let us have the pony and trap. Then we can all drive to Rocheford, where there is a very good draper's shop. There I will buy a silk and get Madame Declassé, in the High Street, to make it for me in time."

"But father won't know you in blue silk."

"I don't want him to. Do you suppose, for a minute, you little geese, that I am going to tell him it is on my account I want the pony and trap? Is it likely he would accede to the wishes of a poor little governess? Not I, *mes enfants*– not I. You three dear things are to be the innocent cause of our drive to Rocheford. Don't you suppose that you want any cotton frocks for the seaside?"

"Oh, yes – yes!" said Nina, "we want frocks, but not cotton ones."

"Muslins are quite as cheap," said Brenda. "I shall call them cotton to your father, and will buy muslin dresses for you – a pale pink muslin each – how will they look, *chéries*?"

"Sweet, sweet!" said Josephine.

"Entrancing!" exclaimed Nina; while Fanchon smacked her lips in anticipation of her own appearance in pink muslin.

Now Brenda knew quite well that these sandy-haired young people with freckled faces and flat features would by no means look their best in pink, be it muslin or cotton, but as she meant them to be foils to herself, she decided to leave them in crass ignorance on this point. The very name, pink muslin, had a delicious sound, and, as there was little time to waste, she told the girls that she would excuse lessons that morning and go upstairs to the school-room to make some mental calculations. Then, having estimated the exact amount of money which the different dresses would cost, she would invade the Reverend Josiah at the hour named.

That good man was busy preparing his sermon when Brenda's gentle but distinct knock was heard at the door.

"I am so sorry to disturb you, sir," she said on entering, and she dropped the prettiest imaginable little curtsey. It was quite old-fashioned, and delighted the rector.

"Please don't apologise, Miss Carlton," he said. "You want to speak to me, and I am prepared to listen. What is it all about? I hope my dear girl is not dissatisfied in any way. I know your life here must be a little – a little – dull; but I trust that you are not thinking of leaving us."

"Leaving you – my dear kind sir?" replied Brenda. "Far indeed are such ideas from my thoughts. I am nothing but a dependent, and lonely at that. Dear Mr Amberley, have I not heard you talk of your sweet children as orphans? Well, am I not an orphan, too?"

"Alas – that it should be the case!" said Mr Amberley.

"It is the case. My darling sister and I were left without parents when she was a very little child and I was a young girl. She has been fortunate enough to be admitted into one of the best schools anywhere in this part of England, or indeed, I may say in England at all. I allude to Hazlitt Chase. You must have heard of the name, sir."

"Hazlitt Chase?" said Mr Amberley. "Of course I know the name. Lady Sophia L'Estrange has two daughters there – Mary and Juliet. Sweet young girls. Lady Sophia lives about four miles from here. I had not the slightest idea that you had a sister at such a distinguished school, Miss Carlton."

"I have that privilege," said Brenda, dropping her eyelids so that her long, curly, black eyelashes could rest in the most becoming manner against her peach-bloomy cheeks.

The rector looked at her with admiration.

"She certainly is a very sweet creature," he thought.

"What is the name of your sister?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"She is called Penelope."

"How quaint and old-fashioned!"

"She is about to take a somewhat old-fashioned part," continued Brenda. "I don't pretend to know the old stories as I ought to; you, sir, who are such a good Greek scholar, must have heard of the character of Helen of Troy."

"Beautiful Helen!" whispered Mr Amberley, under his breath.

"My sister is to take part in some tableaux which Mrs Hazlitt is presenting of Tennyson's 'Dream of Fair Women.' She wants me to see it, and I am anxious to go. I think that if I leave here by an early train, I can spend the greater part of the day at Hazlitt Chase and return here soon after midnight."

"That will be a late hour to ask the servants to sit up."

"But if you will entrust me with a latch-key – "

"No, no, my dear girl: I will sit up for you myself with pleasure. Of course you shall go."

"Thank you," said Brenda: "you are more than kind." She fidgeted a little, then continued: "It will be a very gay party, and people from many parts of England will assemble there to witness the different events of the day. Tennyson's 'Dream of Fair Women' is, I believe, to take the most distinguished place in the day's proceedings and, in short, sir – I want to be suitably dressed."

"Of course – of course," said Mr Amberley, looking a little confused, as he always was when the subject of money was even approached. "Eh – a neat cotton, eh?"

"Well, sir – it must be something rather better on this occasion; but if I might ask for my quarter's salary, I have no doubt I can manage."

"My poor, dear girl! have I forgotten it? How long is it due?"

"It won't be due for a fortnight, sir; but I thought, under the circumstances, that you might – I mean that you would be so kind – "

"You shall have a cheque immediately. Let me see – your salary is thirty pounds a year, that means seven pounds ten a quarter. I will write you a cheque for the amount; you can cash it at the bank. Get a pretty cool-looking cotton, my dear Miss Carlton – something with rosebuds on it: you are – so like a rosebud yourself."

"One minute please, sir. I cannot get the sort of dress I want at Harroway. I must go to Rocheford to make my purchase and I think it would be a good opportunity to get the girls' dresses for the seaside at the same time."

"Oh dear, dear, dear!" said Mr Amberley. "Haven't they got enough dresses from last year?"

"Oh, no!" said Brenda, shaking her head. "They are growing so quickly; you quite forget that."

"I only know that my funds are very low and that there are a great many sick people in the parish," said the rector.

"Still your children must be clothed," said Brenda, putting on a severe air. "You have taken lodgings for them at the sea, and I can't walk about with girls who are not presentable. I would rather, painful as it seems, resign my post – though of course I don't really mean to do it, but – "

The rector looked really terrified.

"You must not neglect my poor orphans! What would my children do without you? But what is necessary? What do you think each will require?"

"I can manage with three pounds for each: that is, nine pounds for the three and seven pounds ten for myself. I know it seems a great deal of money, but you cannot imagine how careful I will be."

"I am sure – I am certain you will."

Mr Amberley drew a cheque for the amount. He could not help sighing more than once as he did so. It represented a very large sum to him, and would preclude the possibility of his taking any holiday himself; for little Joe Hoskins and Mary Miller must go to the seaside at any cost. Nevertheless, the picture of his home without Brenda Carlton, and his three orphans neglected and forsaken, was greater than his patience could abide; and he made up his mind to do what Brenda wished, let the consequences be what they might. She had her way also with regard to the horse and trap and returned to her pupils with a cheque in her hand for sixteen pounds ten and a most triumphant expression on her pretty face.

Not the most remote idea had she of spending three pounds on each girl; but she could get them a flimsy muslin each, some brown shoes to wear on the sands, and a cheap hat for each sandy-covered head, which would delight their small minds. The rest of the money would be her own. Thus she would be able to make herself look distinguished, and yet not touch the twenty pounds which Penelope had sent her from school.

"Hurrah!" she cried, as she joined her pupils. "The good little papa has come up to the scratch. You shall have your pink muslins, and hats, and gloves, and shoes besides. Only the muslins must be made at home, and I myself will trim the hats. Now then – prepare for a happy holiday. The pony trap will be at the door by twelve o'clock. Nina, run to cook, and tell her to make up some sandwiches for us and a bottle of lemonade. We need not spend our precious fairings at the confectioner's if we take home-made provisions with us."

Nina, in rapture at the happy time which she felt was before her, flew off to obey Brenda's behests and, sharp at twelve, the little party left the old rectory and drove down through the shady village street.

Brenda drove. She was a capital whip, and never looked better than when she was so employed. More than one person turned to gaze with admiration at the handsome showy girl, and her heart swelled within her with pride and satisfaction as she noticed this fact. At the bank she changed the cheque, taking care that her pupils did not see the amount which swelled her little purse.

They arrived at Rocheford in about an hour, and there a silk of the palest shade of blue was chosen with soft French lace for trimming. Nina was absolutely open-mouthed with admiration as she saw the exquisite fabric being told off in yards by the shopman. After the dress was bought, Brenda purchased very pretty pink muslins for her pupils, and white hats which she meant to trim with cheap white muslin.

They then went to a shoemaker's where they got shoes, and to another shop for gloves, and finally to interview that modiste of great fame, as Madame Declassé described herself. But here disappointment awaited the little girls, for Brenda insisted on entering the apartment all alone.

"You, Fanchon," she said, "must hold the pony's reins. Don't hold them too tight – just like this; see, *mon enfant*– do attend to my directions. Now then, I shan't be very long."

"But may not two of us come with you?" asked Josephine. "We should love to see the pretty things in Madame Declassé's show-room."

"No, no; I must see her alone; she will do it cheaper for me if I am alone."

Brenda skipped away, and the girls were left in charge of the dull, over-worked little pony with the western sun beating down upon them. They had certainly passed an exciting day, but, on the whole, they were not quite satisfied. There was a mutinous feeling in each small breast which only needed the match of suspicion to set it on fire. It was Nina who, in the most casual voice, applied that match.

"I am looking at myself," she said, "in the mirror let into the pony trap just facing us; and I am awfully red."

"Of course you are, Nina," laughed both her sisters.

"My face is red," continued Nina, "and so is my hair; and my eyes are not at all big. Do you think I am really pretty, or am I ugly?"

She gave an anxious glance at Josephine and Fanchon.

"Ugly – of course," laughed Fanchon.

"Very ugly – a little fright," said Josephine.

"Then if I am a fright," said Nina, becoming a more vivid crimson, "so are you, too, for you are red also, and your hair is sandy, and you have very small eyes."

"Oh, do shut up," said Fanchon.

Nina turned restlessly on her hot seat. "I wish I was like Brenda," she said, after a minute's pause.

"Well, you are not, and all the wishing in the world won't make you so," was Josephine's answer.

"I suppose she is quite beautiful," said Fanchon, with a sigh.

"Oh, yes – there isn't a doubt of it," continued Nina. "How the men do stare at her."

"It's very rude of men to stare," said Josephine. "It is not at all to be admired."

"But Brenda likes it, all the same," said Nina. "I know she does, for she nudges me sometimes as we are on the way to church. What a long time she is with Madame Declassé!"

"Nina," said Fanchon, "if you don't sit still, you will startle Rob, and he may take it into his head to run away."

"Rob run away! He knows better," answered Nina. "Why, he has hardly a kick in him – poor old dear! You wouldn't run away, would you, Rob?"

Rob flicked his ears, and gave a slight movement to his tail. This he considered sufficient answer to Nina's tender enquiry.

"I wish Brenda was not quite so long," she said. "Why, of course she is a long time. She has got to have her lovely blue silk made up. Fancy Brenda in silk! How astonished father will be! Silk is the dream of his life. He said when he married mother, she wore silk. She never, never wore it since – he said – she could not afford it, only very rich people could. There was a time when I thought of keeping silkworms, and winding off the silk from the cocoons until I had enough to make a dress; but Brenda laughed me out of that."

"Well – she's got her deserts. She must have spent a lot of money on the dress," said Fanchon.

"She didn't spend much on ours, that I know," said Nina. "Those pink muslins were only sixpence three farthings the yard, and she wouldn't get an extra yard for me, although I did so want mine to have little flounces – I think little flounces are so stylish. Oh dear, dear! I wish she would come!"

Here Nina took up a carefully folded parcel which contained the material for the girls' pink muslin dresses.

"Let's look at it," she said – "let's see it in the broad light. It'll be something to amuse us."

"Oh, but we never can pack it up again," exclaimed Josephine.

"Have you got your pocket knife with you, Fanchon?" asked Nina.

Fanchon declared that she had.

"Well, give it to me, and I will cut a wee hole in the paper, just enough for us to see our darling gowns."

This was too fascinating a proposal to be lightly refused, and in the end the girls had removed enough of the brown paper wrapping to disclose a certain portion of the delicate pink muslin which lay folded beneath.

"I wonder now," said Nina – she raised her flushed face and looked at her red little person in the tiny square of glass – "I wonder why she makes us wear pink. Do you think, Fanchon – do you think, Josephine, that it suits us?"

The two elder girls were quite silent, but a horrified expression crept over Fanchon's face. She was older than the others, and had once heard it said that a girl with red hair – however pretty she might be – ought not to wear pink. A sense of revolt filled her soul.

"Why don't you speak?" said Nina.

"I – I am thinking," she said, crossly. "Don't worry me."

She was thinking to good purpose. The other two seemed to divine her thoughts. They all sat silent and moody.

"I shall do a sum in arithmetic to-night," thought Josephine. "I know exactly how many yards of that horrid pink muslin she bought and what the hats cost, and those little cheap shoes, and those gloves."

But Josephine did not say the words aloud. After a little time Nina said:

"I saw a quantity of gold in Brenda's purse. It seems so odd that she should spend a lot of father's money on herself, and so very, very little on us – doesn't it? I don't understand it – do you, girls?"

But before the girls could reply, Brenda, looking fresh and captivating, as usual, appeared by their side.

"Now, then," – she said – "home we go. Oh, I am glad to get out of this heat. I think we'll have supper in the garden to-night. It will be lovely under the mulberry tree. What do you say, *petites*? What dear, pretty little darlings you are!"

But the pretty little darlings were not in the best of tempers, and Brenda had some trouble in getting them back to good humour. She herself was in excellent spirits, for she had employed Madame Declassé not only to make the dress in a way so sweet as to take the hearts of all who saw her by storm, but was she not also to make her a long white serge dust coat, very fashionable looking and very, very smart, and a little white hat, which would exactly finish off the pale blue costume? and was not Madame Declassé to supply a parasol and gloves, all suited to that distinguished looking young lady, Miss Brenda Carlton?

But these small matters Brenda kept to herself. It would never do for the sandy-haired daughters of the Reverend Josiah Amberley to know about them. Her object was to humour them to the very top of their bent until she got them away with her to the seaside, and then – behold! what twenty pounds still quite unspent might not achieve! For the blue silk dress was paid for, and Madame Declassé would not charge for the making up, nor for the parasol, nor the white serge coat, nor the pretty white hat, for a long, long time. It really did not matter to Madame when her little bills were paid. She was quite willing and ready to accommodate her customers.

As the little party were driving in by the tumble-down gates, Nina, however, made a remark. She raised her light blue eyes and looked full at Brenda and said, in a tone of question and some alarm:

"Do you really, really think, Brenda, that pink muslin is the most suitable sort of dress for red girls like us?"

"Of course she doesn't," said Fanchon.

Josephine was silent. Brenda looked hastily from one of her pupils to the other.

"Listen," she said, "I have considered the subject of your toilettes with the utmost care. Your good father can allow very little for your clothes. He imagines that you will wear stout cotton dresses during your sojourn at Marshlands-on-the-Sea, but I do not intend you to appear in anything so *gauche*. I have, therefore, bought delicate muslin, which will be made up to suit you. Of course pink muslin will suit you; it is *the* colour for blondes like yourselves."

"Blondes, are we?" said Nina – "I thought we were reds!"

"You little goose!" exclaimed Brenda, bending forward and kissing Nina with affection. "Haven't you just the darlingest little face, and who loves you if your own Brenda does not? But talk to your father on the subject if you wish, and I will change the pink muslins for cottons to-morrow – I can easily do so."

"Oh, no – no," said Fanchon.

Josephine shut her lips. Nina nestled up to her governess in an ecstasy of love and affection. If indeed she was a blonde – that lovely word – why, the pink muslin *must* suit her!

Chapter Seven
Light Blue Silk

During the days that elapsed between the purchase of the pale blue silk and the grand fête at Mrs Hazlitt's school, it may well be supposed that Brenda Carlton was very busy. Not Penelope at school, not any of those girls who were to take the characters of Tennyson's "Dream of Fair Women," were as much occupied as this young woman. She had so much to think of and to do; for she had not only to see about her own toilette, which meant frequent visits to Madame Declassé's, at Rocheford, and therefore frequent demands for the pony trap, but she had also to help the girls to make up their pink muslins.

She was sorry to have to dress her pupils in a colour she knew in her heart of hearts could not possibly suit them, but she argued with her own conscience that no possible dress that she could devise would make the Misses Amberley look well and, that being the case, they might just as soon be frightful as not. She had no pricks of conscience with regard to this matter. The little red-haired girls were useful to her for the time being. She intended to have a delightful outing at the seaside and, in order to effect this, she must keep the Reverend Josiah in the best of humours until her grand month was over.

This was quite easy to accomplish as long as the girls themselves were pleased. But Brenda was by no means a fool, and she judged by certain remarks of Nina's, who was the most innocent of the confiding three, that already a few ugly little suspicions with regard to their governess were animating their small breasts. In short, they were the sort of girls who would very soon discover for themselves the wickedness of this wicked world. They were not specially amiable; there was nothing whatever attractive about them. When once they discovered Brenda, as Brenda really was, her position in the Reverend Josiah's establishment would come to an end.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.