Title: Turquoise and Ruby

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Release date: July 8, 2013 [EBook #43146]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

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"Turquoise and Ruby"

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 WILL TELL YOU QUITE PLAINLY,” SHE SAID, “I WANT TWENTY POUNDS.”—*Page* 41.

Turquoise and Ruby.

“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.

Well, she intended to secure another home before then. There was a certain rich young man whom she hoped to attract while at Marshlands-on-the-Sea. When once engaged to him, it mattered little to her what any of the Amberleys thought about her. Still, the present fortnight must be used to the best advantage, and Brenda took great care how she trimmed the white hate. She made them look exceedingly pretty and stylish, for she had wonderful fingers which could contrive and arrange the very simplest materials as though by magic. The pink muslin frocks were also made to suit each girl. It did not matter if they were a little skimpy; the girls were all young, and Nina, in particular, ought still to wear very short skirts.

“No, Nina,” said her governess, “I am not going to give you flounces, but I shall put a couple of false tucks upon the muslin skirt.”

“I’d much rather have flounces,” said Nina, who was nearly in tears. “I like little tiny frills, they are so pretty, and you have given them to Fanchon and to Josephine.”

“That is the very reason, *chérie*, why you must not have them,” was Brenda’s remark. “The washing will be altogether too expensive. Your poor, dear papa, who is taking no holiday himself, cannot possibly afford the laundry bills which I shall have to send him if all your dresses are flounced.”

This argument seemed conclusive, and Nina had to be satisfied—that is, she pretended to be, but there was her little scheme of vengeance working up in her small brain, and she intended to talk it over with her sisters on the eighth of July, that long, long, wonderful day when beautiful Brenda would not be with them, and when they could do exactly as they liked.

Clever as she was, Brenda could not guess the thoughts which filled her little pupil’s brain, and she was too much interested in her own affairs just then to trouble herself much about so insignificant a young person.

Meanwhile, time flew as it always does when one is busy, and Brenda’s own delicate and beautiful dress arrived at the rectory two days before she was to wear it. Now, Brenda did not want any of her pupils to see her in this dress, and above all things, she did not wish the Reverend Josiah to perceive that she—that absolutely dependent orphan—could leave his establishment attired in pale blue silk. She trusted much to the white serge coat, which she had ordered, to cover the silk. Nevertheless, she knew she must run some dangers. As a matter of fact, she had only spent about thirty shillings on each of her pupils, and had, therefore, purloined from the sum which had been given her for their clothes four pounds ten wherewith to line her own pockets. This she hoped would never be discovered, nor would it have been, had Nina not been quite so sharp, and Fanchon so really discontented with the quality of the muslin dress she was to wear at Marshlands-on-the-Sea.

“Please, please, Brenda,” said Fanchon, on the day before the great fête, “won’t you put on your pale blue silk, and let us see you in it? It has come, I know, for I was in the garden when the carrier arrived with that great box from Madame Declassé’s. Father was with us, and he asked what could be in the box.”

“And what did you say, dear?”

“I said it was a box full of pots for making jam—that you had bought the pots the day we were at Rocheford, as you thought it would be such a good thing for cook to turn all the gooseberries into jam while we were at the seaside.”

“What a very clever little Fanchon you are!” said Brenda, looking very attentively at her pupil. “And what did papa say—dear innocent papa?”

“Oh, he was ever so pleased—he loves gooseberry jam, and said that we must on no account strip the trees beforehand, so as to leave plenty for cook to boil down to put into the pots.”

“What a mercy he didn’t feel the box!” was Brenda’s remark. “I do think, Fanchon, you are very clever—very wicked, of course, and I suppose you ought to be punished. But there—you meant well, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did,” said Fanchon, raising her pale blue eyes and fixing them on her governess’ face.

Brenda looked back at the girl. She heartily wished that Fanchon was two years younger and five years stupider, and even a little more ugly; but, such as she was, she must make the best of her.

“Of course,” continued Fanchon, who seemed to divine her governess’ thoughts, “if you really think that I told a wicked story, I can go to father now and tell him that I made a mistake, and that the box contained your blue silk dress, and—and—other things of yours—and not the jam pots. Shall I, Brenda? shall I?”

“You goosey! you goosey!” said Brenda. She squeezed Fanchon’s arm and began to pace up and down the terrace walk with her pupil by her side. “You know,” she said, lowering her voice and speaking in the most confiding and enthralling way, “you are older than the others, and I can confide in you. It is wrong to tell lies—very, very wrong—and whatever possessed you, you silly girl, to think of jam pots? I am sure nothing was further from our heads on that auspicious day. But I don’t want your dear father to see the dress that I am going to the fête in, and I will tell you why.”

“Please do,” said Fanchon, “for to tell the truth, Brenda, neither Nina, nor Josephine, nor I understand you always.”

“Well, dears, is it likely that you should? I am, let me see, between twenty-two and twenty-three years of age, although I don’t look it by any means.”

“I don’t know what that age looks like, so can’t say,” was Fanchon’s remark.

“Well, dear—it is a very beautiful age, and very young. It is the age when a girl comes—so to speak—to her prime, and when she thinks of—of,”—Brenda lowered her voice—“getting married.”

“Oh!” said Fanchon, colouring crimson. “You don’t mean to say—”

“I don’t mean to say anything at all, I have nothing to confide, so don’t imagine it for a single moment. But at the seaside, where the gay people will be, and the band will play, and there’ll be no end of tea out of doors and all sorts of fun of one sort and another, it may happen that—that—somebody *may* see your Brenda and—oh, Fanchon, need I say any more!”

“I don’t suppose you need,” was Fanchon’s answer. She felt immensely flattered.

“Think what it would mean to me,” continued Brenda. “A prince might come along, who would fall in love with the beggar maid.”

“But you—with your blue silk dress, to be called a beggar maid! That name might suit poor Nina, who can’t have flounces, even, to her pink muslin dress that only cost sixpence three farthings a yard.”

Brenda was startled at Fanchon’s memory with regard to the price of the muslin.

“No,” continued that young lady, “you’re not a bit like the beggar maid.”

“Ah, but—my dear girl—I am the beggar maid, and I am waiting for the king to come along who will raise me to sit on his throne, and—in fact—I am going to whisper a *great* secret to you, Fanchon—”

“What is it?” said Fanchon, who was at once fretful and disgusted, overpowered with curiosity, and yet heartily wishing that Brenda would not confide in her.

“Well—I will tell you,” said Brenda. “I have been left a little money—just the *merest* little trifle, and I am spending a little of it on my blue silk, and I don’t want any one to know but just my own darling Fanchon; my eldest pupil—who loves me so well! Perhaps, my *chérie*, I may buy you a pretty gift out of some of the money. What do you say to a little gold bracelet—a bangle, I mean?”

Brenda remembered that she could get a silver gilt bracelet for a couple of shillings at a shop she knew of at Rocheford, and that it would be worth her while to purchase Fanchon’s sympathy at that price.

“Oh—but I should love it!” said the young lady, looking at her sunburnt and badly formed wrist.

“The bangle would give you good style,” said Brenda. “Well, we’ll say nothing about it now—but—well, as I have given you my confidence, you won’t repeat it.”

“I suppose not, but I do want to see your blue silk.”

“All right, you shall, but not the others—I draw the line at the others. You can slip out of bed to-night and come to me, and I will put it on and show myself. I am going away early in the morning before any of you are up.”

“But I am certain father will be up, for he said so, and he’s going to let you in afterwards.”

Brenda considered for a moment—

“I can’t help his letting me in, but he shan’t see me off,” she said—“no one need do that. Well, now—go and join your sisters. Go to bed at the usual hour, and come to me at ten o’clock; then I will put on the dress and you shall judge of the effect.”

The thought of seeing the wonderful dress and of possessing a real gold bangle were two circumstances enough to turn the slight brain of Fanchon Amberley. She did not confide to her sisters what her conversation had been, and managed that evening to elude them and to present herself at Brenda’s door as the clock struck ten. The other two were sound asleep, so she had little difficulty in getting away from them, and, as Brenda was on the watch, she let her pupil in at once, immediately locking the door as soon as Fanchon got inside.

“Now then,” she said, “you just hop on to my bed, for I don’t want you to catch cold. See—here’s the dress.”

Madame Declassé was really an excellent dressmaker, and the pale blue silk would have looked lovely to any eyes, but the unaccustomed ones of Fanchon Amberley fairly blinked as they gazed at it.

“I never imagined anything so lovely!” she cried. “But you must put it on—you promised.”

Brenda obeyed. She was gratified by the curious mixture of vanity and greed, envy and admiration which filled poor Fanchon’s face, and she attired herself, not only in the dress, which gave her little figure such a “chic” appearance, but also put on the white hat and the dainty white lace scarf, and drew the long white gloves upon her slender arms. Finally, she slipped into the white serge coat which was to cover the finery, lest the Reverend Josiah should catch sight of it.

“He won’t see me to-morrow morning,” she said, “and when I come back in the evening, he’ll think that I am wearing a cotton dress underneath the serge. There now, Fanchon, you have seen everything, and you may rest satisfied that I shall have plenty to tell you when I return.”

“I am bewildered,” said Fanchon. “Of course you look beautiful; of course the prince or the king, whenever either of them comes along, will fall in love with you, for you look like a princess or a queen yourself! I wish I were beautiful too. I hate—yes—I *hate* being ugly!” and the poor child gave a sob of pain and disappointment.

“Now listen, Fanchon. You won’t be ugly when you are grown up. It doesn’t matter a bit how you look now, for you are only a little girl. What you have to do now is to help me all you can, and then, when you come to be eighteen or nineteen years of age—I will help you, *petite*, and get you a good husband, and drew you in the colours that will make you look—oh—marvellous! Keep me as your friend and you will be a wise little girl: do the reverse, and you will rue it.”

Fanchon shed a few more tears, but finally yielded to Brenda’s seductions and clasped her arms round her neck and kissed that young person’s cool cheek with her own hot lips; then went to bed to dream of that wonderful vision in blue silk and the prince who was surely going to find her.

The next morning, at a very early hour, Brenda took her departure, having successfully avoided the Reverend Josiah, who had gone to bed with the full intention of getting up to see his dear young governess off and to tell her that he would assuredly sit up and have something hot for supper when she came back in the evening. He had not yet thanked her for her consideration in buying the jam pots.

“The dear girl must have got them out of her own money,” he said to himself. “She really is a treasure, and I am so fond of gooseberry jam. One can have so few indulgences—what with the sick of the parish and my very small stipend. But when I think of that poor young creature, and of what she is doing for me and my children, I cannot be too thankful. I will certainly thank her in suitable words when she returns, and I will see her off in the morning.”

But, alack and alas! the Reverend Josiah was tired, for he had had a very long and fatiguing day, and Brenda’s footsteps were light as the falling of snow, and she had left the house and gone out to the stables and got the pony put to the cart. She had also awakened Jock—universally known as “the boy,” and had given him fourpence to drive her to Harroway station. All these things had been done, and Brenda was away—yes, away for her day’s holiday before the Reverend Josiah opened his eyes on that summer morning.

Chapter Eight.

Break-Up Day.

Nothing at all happened to Brenda of the least importance during her journey to Hazlitt Chase. She went second-class as far as Rocheford. There she changed for first-class, for she had every intention of doing the thing in style.

When she arrived at the little station, she saw several smart-looking carriages waiting to take guests up to The Chase and, going up to the driver of one, requested him immediately to convey her there. He looked at the very smart lady, admired her blue eyes and the radiant and truly natural colour in her cheeks, and signified to her that if she would enter the low victoria, he would take her to The Chase. She did so, wrapping her white serge cloak daintily round her, and leaning back in her seat with evident enjoyment.

She was reaching her goal—the goal she had been aspiring to for so many long weeks now; and that twenty pounds—yes, and a little more besides, some of the Reverend Josiah Amberley's money (that money which he had given her to clothe his own little daughters)—reposed snugly in her purse at home. Her conscience did not trouble her, for Brenda had never cultivated that excellent monitor. It lay quiet and asleep within her breast. Her whole nature was full of anticipation and ripe for mischief. She was anxious to see her sister and the school, and to make a first-rate impression there.

As she sat leaning back in the little victoria, her white and dainty parasol unfurled, her white gloves gleaming in the summer sunshine, a lady, considerably older than herself, came out of the station and, going up to the driver, asked if she could have a seat also up to The Chase. This lady's name was Mrs Hungerford, and she had two young daughters at the school. She was a fashionable woman, beautifully dressed, and when she took her seat by Brenda's side, Brenda felt that she could not do better than make her her friend. Accordingly, she entered into what she considered a very delightful conversation. She talked simply, and yet suitably, with regard to herself, and did what she could to add to Mrs Hungerford's comfort. For instance, the astute young woman proposed that her white parasol should shade both of them from the sun. Mrs Hungerford was a dark-complexioned woman and she immediately agreed to the offer. As a matter of fact, she did not much mind whether the sun's rays fell on her face and neck or not. She noticed, although she made no remark at the time, that Brenda did not greatly care either; for she was absorbed in shading herself from the slightest fleck of undue light.

At last they reached The Chase. The little carriage drew up daintily at the front door, where a number of pupils were assembled and where Mrs Hazlitt herself stood to welcome her visitors. The girls in the school were all dressed in white—some in white washing silk, some in white lace, some only in white muslin. But whatever the dress, they looked neat and fresh and, in Brenda's eyes, were elegant.

She looked anxiously around for Penelope, who was not immediately in sight. Mrs Hungerford got quickly out of the carriage, for she saw her own two little girls, who rushed to her with cries of delight. As she did so, something glittered at Brenda's feet. She was stepping out when she saw it. It was a little gold bangle with a blue turquoise clasp. It was very pretty and dainty, and altogether the sort of thing which a girl like Brenda would covet. She had no immediate idea, however, of stealing it. She stooped to pick it up immediately, to avoid its being stepped upon, and was about to give it to Mrs Hungerford, whose property she supposed it to be, when that lady went straight into the house, without taking the slightest notice of her. With trembling fingers, Brenda slipped the gold bangle into her pocket. She longed most earnestly to be able to wear it. It was of beautiful workmanship, and the turquoise which clasped it together was of unusual size and purity of colour. It was quite a girlish-looking thing and would be, Brenda felt sure, most unsuitable for dark, stately Mrs Hungerford.

All these thoughts with regard to it rushed through her mind as she stood for a minute, unnoticed, on the green sward which swept up to the house at each side of the principal entrance.

Other carriages had immediately followed the little victoria, which rolled swiftly away out of sight, and, for a minute, no one spoke to Brenda. Then Mrs Hazlitt herself came up to her.

"Ah, how do you do, my dear?" she said. "You are—"

"I am Brenda Carlton," said Brenda, raising those lovely melting blue eyes to the good lady's face. "It is *so* kind of you to invite me here. And where is Penelope?"

Mrs Hazlitt looked around. She was annoyed at Penelope not being in sight, and immediately called Honora Beverley to take her place.

"Honora," she said—"this is Miss Carlton. I suppose Penelope has not finished dressing; will you kindly take Miss Carlton to her sister's room? I am sorry, my dear, that I have not a corner to offer you to sleep in to-night; but on break-up days we are always overfull."

Brenda made a becoming reply, and followed in the wake of beautiful, fair Honora. Her own dress, it seemed to her, was most stylish—most absolutely all that any girl could desire, until she noticed Honora's white lace robe. It clung softly to her lissom young figure, and had an indescribable air about it which not even Madame Declassé could achieve. In short, it bore the hall-mark of Paris, for Honora Beverley was one of the richest girls in the school. She had always been accustomed to being well dressed, and had, therefore, never given the matter a thought.

She was a most kind-hearted, high-principled girl, and was anxious to do what she could for Brenda, whom she, in her heart of hearts, could not help dubbing as second-class, notwithstanding the girl's real beauty.

"I am so sorry," she said, "that Penelope was not present when you arrived; but she always does take a long time over her toilette. We must all assemble in the hall, however, in a quarter of an hour, so you will probably find her fully dressed. That is the way to her room. Have you come from a distance, Miss Carlton?"

Brenda mentioned the obscure village where the Reverend Josiah lived. Honora had never heard of it, neither was she deeply interested. She chatted in a pleasant voice of the different events of the day, and said how delightful everything was, and how singularly kind she thought it of Penelope to take the part of Helen of Troy.

"For I couldn't do it," she said. "It is just a case of conscience."

There was something in her tone and in her gentle look which made Brenda gaze at her, not only with envy, but with dislike.

"Why should your conscience be more tender than my sister's?" was her answer. "And who was Helen of Troy? I never heard of her."

Honora opened her brown eyes. She had not believed that any one existed in the wide world who had not, at one time or another, made the acquaintance of this celebrated woman.

“Penelope will tell you about her,” she said gently. “Of course you know, Miss Carlton, what is wrong for one need not be necessarily wrong for another. We have each to answer for our own conscience, have we not? Ah, and this is Penelope’s room.” She knocked at the door. “Penelope, your sister has come.”

Hurried steps were heard inside the chamber. The door was flung open and Penelope, all in white and looking almost pretty, stood on the threshold. Honora immediately withdrew, and the two sisters found themselves for a few minutes alone.

“Do take off your cloak and let me look at you,” said Penelope. “I have been telling the girls so much about you, and most of them are all agog to see you. Dear, dear! pale blue silk! Well, it is rather pretty, only I wish you had been in white; but you look very nice all the same, dear.”

“You ate highly dissatisfied, Penelope; and I’m sure I’ve done all that mortal could to oblige you,” said Brenda.

“And I to oblige you,” retorted Penelope. “I can tell you, I had trouble about those five-pound notes, but you got them safely, didn’t you?”

“Yes, of course I did: I only wish you could have managed more. This dress is much prettier than your insipid white. White is all very well for schoolgirls, but I am grown up, remember.”

“Yes, yea—and you look very nice,” said Penelope. “It’s more than you do, Penelope; you’re not a bit pretty,” said frank Brenda.

“I know it—and it seems so highly ridiculous that I should be forced to take the part of Helen of Troy. Of course, Honora was the girl absolutely made on the very model, but she refused.”

“Who is Honora?” asked Brenda.

“Why, that lovely girl in the white lace—(it’s all real, I can tell you, and was sent to her from Paris)—who brought you to my door.”

“Oh—*that* girl!” said Brenda. “I don’t think her at all remarkable.”

“Don’t you? Well, most people do—she’s quite the belle of the school.”

“And what does the belle of the school signify?” said Brenda, who was feeling decidedly cross. “If a girl could be called the belle of the season, that might be something to aspire to—but the belle of a school! Who cares about that?”

“Well, the schoolgirls do, and while we are at school, it is our world,” said Penelope. “But now I must bring you downstairs, and put you into your place. You must get a seat on one of the benches near the front, or you won’t see one half that is going on. Come along, you may be sure I will fly to you whenever I have a second, but I shall be very busy all day.”

“Will there be gentlemen present?” asked Brenda.

“Oh—certainly. The brothers and cousins and fathers and uncles of the pupils.”

“I don’t care anything at all about the fathers and uncles, but I should like to be introduced to some of the brothers and cousins.”

“Well, I daresay that can be managed—”

“Penelope—do come!” called Cara’s voice in the distance, and Penelope, accompanied by her sister, had to fly downstairs.

A few minutes later, Brenda found herself in the wide, open court. She was partly sheltered by a great awning. Here the prizes were to be given away, a few speeches were to be made, and a few recitations given by some of the most accomplished girls and teachers.

No one took any special notice of her, and this acute young person discovered that if she did not play her own cards well and immediately, she would be out of the fun. Now, this was the last thing she wished. The slight feeling of discomfort which had arisen in her breast when she saw Honora Beverley in her simple and exquisite dress had vanished: the colour brightened in her cheeks; she felt assured that she looked well, and assuredly she was pretty, although second-class.

She deliberately took a seat near two young men who were brothers of two of the older girls. She asked one of them quite an innocent question, to which he replied. She decided that he was good-looking and that she could have a pleasant day in his company, and immediately requested him, in that simple and pathetic voice which always so strongly appealed to the Reverend Josiah, to tell her all about the company—who was who, and what was what. She said that she herself was a lonely girl who had come from a distance to behold her dear sister in that exquisite creation, Helen of Troy. She talked of Helen as though she had been that good woman’s intimate friend from her youth up, and managed to impress both young men with a lively sense of her pleasantness and her frank, daring sort of beauty.

Presently, one of the little Hungerford girls came along. She belonged to the smaller girls of the school. She came straight up to the young man who was talking to Brenda, and, leaning against him, said in a disconsolate voice:

“It is quite lost; mother did promise that I should have it. Pauline has got hers—hers has a ruby clasp, but mine with the blue turquoise can’t be found anywhere!”

“Why, what is it, Nelly?” said the young man. “Nelly, may I introduce you to this young lady.”

“My name is Carlton—Brenda Carlton. I am the sister of your friend Penelope, who is to be Helen of Troy,” said Brenda. “Is anything wrong, dear?” she continued, speaking kindly, and bending forward so as almost to caress the child by her manner.

Young Hungerford’s dark face quite flushed, and he made room for his little sister to sit between him and Brenda for a minute.

“Tell her—perhaps she will know. Now that I remember, she drove up in the victoria with mother from the station.”

“It is my bangle!” said Nelly. “Mother brought one for me, and the other for Pauline. Mine had a turquoise clasp. She got them from Paris and they are so very, very, very pretty; and Pauline is wearing hers, and mine is gone!”

“Oh, but—how provoking! It must be found, of course,” said Brenda, putting on an air of great sympathy, and wondering how she could get it out of her own pocket without suspicion being directed to her.

Her first impulse was simply to say to the child: “I wonder if I know anything about it,” and then to tell how she had picked it up. But Nellie Hungerford’s next remark prevented her doing so.

“Mother is quite certain that she lost it in the train, for she remembers taking the parcel out when she was looking for some sandwiches in her bag; she noticed then that the string was loose. Mother is convinced that she lost it in the train. Oh dear! oh dear! I should not mind quite so badly if Pauline was not wearing hers. There, Fred—do you see her?” continued the little girl. “It is shining on her arm, and that horrid ruby is gleaming like a bit of fire. I am miserable without mine and, although mother will get me another, it won’t be at all the same thing not wearing it on break-up day.”

“Well, dear—it cannot be helped now,” said the brother, “and I see one of the teachers calling you. I suppose you must take your place. You look very nice indeed, Nellie, and no one will miss the bangle.”

“Do I really look nice?” asked Nellie, fixing her pretty eyes on her brother’s face.

“Of course you do,” he answered.

“You look charming, Miss Hungerford,” suddenly interposed Brenda, “and if I may venture to give an opinion, I prefer little girls without bangles.”

This was a remark which at once pleased young Hungerford and displeased his sister.

“I suppose my mamma knows what little girls ought to wear,” she said with great dignity, and then she moved off to take her seat amid the other girls.

When she was gone, Brenda felt a curious flutter at her heart. If Mrs Hungerford was sure that she had lost her bangle in the train, why need wicked Brenda ever return it to her? Surely, she might keep it as her own delightful possession. She might wear it at Marshlands-on-the-Sea, and attract the attention of that most desirable youth whom she hoped to secure as her future husband.

“Do you know—I quite agree with you,” said a voice in her ear.

She turned to confront the dark eyes of Fred Hungerford.

“What about?” she asked, forgetting herself for the moment.

“I would rather my little sisters did not wear ornaments while they are so young, but mother was specially anxious to please them, and insisted on buying the bangles when we were in Paris a fortnight ago. They were very pretty and simple of their kind, and, I know, good too. The turquoise one, strange to say, was the more expensive of the two. Mother would have liked to get a turquoise for each, but they are such an untidy pair she felt certain one would get lost, and so decided that Pauline should be responsible for the ruby, and dear little Nellie for the turquoise. Then, I wanted her to have them sent to the children by registered post, instead of bringing them to-day, but she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t even bring them in boxes, but just slipped them into a piece of tissue paper the last moment, and, of course, one of them has got lost!”

“Do you think it is likely to be found?” asked Brenda.

“I should say most unlikely; unless one of the officials happened to see it before somebody else got into the carriage. It is exactly the sort of thing which an unscrupulous person would pick up and keep.”

“An unscrupulous person!” echoed Brenda.

“Well—yes. Of course you look so innocent and so—so—young, that of course you cannot be a bit aware of the fact that there are lots of dishonest persons in the world. Poor, dear little Nell! Well, she will cheer up in a minute, and forget all about it.”

Brenda leaned back in her seat. She had now quite made up her mind to keep the bracelet. All she had to do was never to wear it in the presence of the Hungerfords, whom she was scarcely likely to see again, or in the presence of her sister, Penelope. But she could make good use of it at Marshlands-on-the-Sea.

The events of the day began and continued, and Brenda enjoyed herself vastly. Young Mr Hungerford introduced her to one or two friends of his, and during the entire day she hardly spoke to a schoolgirl or to a woman of any sort. The ladies who were present by no means admired her. The schoolgirls themselves had no time to give her a thought. The crowning scene of the day was to be "A Dream of Fair Women," which was put on with exquisite effect; the scene being a dusky wood, with the moonlight shining through. Even Brenda felt moved as she watched the curtain rise over the little act, and observed, for the first time, with particular attention Mrs Hazlitt's noble face and figure as she stood in the shadowy part of the background and began to recite Tennyson's words:

"At last methought that I had wandered far
In an old wood: fresh wash'd in coolest dew
The maiden splendours of the morning star
Shook in the steadfast blue.

"...

"And from within a clear undertone
Thrilled through mine ears in that unblissful clime,
'Pass freely thro': the wood is all thine own,
Until the end of time.'

"At length I saw a lady within call,
Stiller than chisell'd marble, standing there;
A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
And most divinely fair."

There was a stir of surprise from the audience, as the girlish figure was dimly discernible: the hair glittering in its fairness, the eyes soft, and yet full of hidden fire, the whole attitude one of extreme grace. For Penelope's soul had been fired with the music of that great song of songs; and the arrangement of the stage, the simplicity of the dress, the marvellous effects of light and shade had produced what—in very truth—seemed to be that very Helen who had driven men mad with love and longing so many centuries ago. Even Brenda held her breath. Wonder filled her soul, an emotion quite new to her stirred in her breast. She could not take her eyes from the figure at once so stately, so serene, so unlike that little Penelope whom she had always somewhat despised. Great, indeed, was Penelope's success when Brenda, the most matter-of-fact person in the world, forgot that she was her sister at that moment and realised within her breast and through that frail and fickle heart of hers something of the greatness of immortal love.

The other figures dimly moved forward in their order: Cleopatra in her swarthy greatness; Jephtha's daughter, who so gladly obeyed her father's behest and died for the cause of Jehovah; Fair Rosamond, Iphigenia, the rest of that great group. But Brenda could only think of Helen.

At last, the mistress' voice died away. The passionate words no longer filled the air. The young actors rushed out of sight, some to change their dresses, some to be congratulated by their friends. The last event of all the events was over. Congratulation and enthusiasm rose to a great height. Mrs Hazlitt was surrounded by friends who assured her that they had seldom seen anything finer in its way. Helen of Troy stood for a minute apart. There was a swelling lump in her throat. She had been the success of the evening. But for her, the tableaux might almost have been ridiculous. It was just because she forgot, and did the thing; just because for the time she was no longer Penelope—poor, plain, a girl who had to earn her bread by-and-by—but some other soul had inspired her—that Tennyson's "Dream of Fair Women" had become something to talk of in all the future days of the old school. But the enthusiasm which had filled her breast faded now. She was puzzled and frightened at her own emotions. She wandered a little way into the wood and, leaning her head against the trunk of a tree, burst into tears.

It was there that Honora Beverley found her.

"Why, surely, Helen—I mean Penelope," she said—

"Oh, leave me," said Penelope, turning swiftly. "Something is hurt in my heart—I don't know what it is, and yet—yes—I do know."

"You did it splendidly! I couldn't have believed it of you—no one could."

"It wasn't me," replied Penelope. "I did it because I couldn't help myself. Just for a minute I was raised into something else. Perhaps it was Mrs Hazlitt's voice; wasn't she wonderful?"

"Yes," said Honora, "but I am thinking of you as you are. Come and be congratulated: you are the heroine of the evening."

"No, I cannot: I don't want them to see me; I would rather just creep away and put on my plain dress and say good-bye to Brenda; I have hardly seen her all day."

"Oh, but your sister has been quite happy: she has not been neglected, I can assure you."

"Still, I must talk to her for a minute or two, and she has to catch her train. Let me go, Honora. Don't tell any one that I cried. I am rather ashamed of myself: I don't—I don't quite know why."

Honora bent down. She was taller than Penelope, and much more slim. She kissed the girl on her forehead. Penelope suddenly clung to her.

“Why didn’t you do it—you who could?”

“That is just it: I couldn’t. I don’t pretend that I am not more beautiful than you in face, but that has nothing to do with one’s personating the part. If you really feel it, you take the character of the part until it grows into your face. I could never have been Helen. You did it splendidly, no one could have looked more lovely. Just remember that you have had a great triumph and be happy and, Penelope—one minute—”

“Yes,” said Penelope, pausing.

“I want to have a talk with you to-morrow.”

“Very well.”

“We shall all leave during the course of the day, but you are staying at the school.”

“I am.”

“Come to my room at ten o’clock. Good-bye for the present.”

Penelope flew out of sight. She rushed upstairs, changed her Greek dress for a pretty, simple white one, in which she had been apparelled during the early part of the day and, after considerable searching, found her sister. Brenda was refreshing herself with cake and claret cup when Penelope came up to her.

“Oh—good gracious!” she said, when she saw Penelope’s face very pale now, with her eyes looking lighter and more faded than usual because of the sudden tears she had shed. “I do wish to goodness I had not seen you again to-night.”

“What a fearfully unkind thing to say, Brenda, when I have been just longing to be with you.”

“I could have gone home and dreamt all night that I had a beautiful sister,” continued Brenda—“but now—”

Just then young Mr Hungerford appeared.

“Ah,”—he said to Brenda—“you have found your sister. May I congratulate you!” he said; and he looked at poor, dowdy little Penelope with that wonder which his honest eyes could not but reflect. For how was it possible that she had ever been got to present one of the most majestic figures in ancient story!

Penelope murmured something and then turned to her sister.

“I must get out of this,” she said. “I simply can’t stand their congratulations. I ought never to have done it—I only wish I hadn’t.”

“Well, come with me to the station; I don’t suppose Mrs Hazlitt will mind. You should have worn your Greek costume for the rest of the evening; these people would have gone on admiring you.”

“No, they wouldn’t. Helen with the limelight and the dark wood and the voice talking above her was not me. She was something quite foreign to me: somebody else got into me just for a minute.”

“Oh, how wildly and impossibly you do talk, Penelope! I see you’re going to be queer as well as plain. Well, unless you wish to say good-bye at once, come to the station with me.”

“I will—I should like to,” said Penelope.

She rushed upstairs and came down in her hat and jacket. The same little victoria which had brought Brenda from the station was waiting to convey her back. Penelope was feeling dead tired.

“I shall have a sickening time,” she said, “during the holidays all alone with Mademoiselle in this great place and nothing whatever to do. I don’t love books and I don’t care for work and—oh dear—I envy you; you can go to the seaside and have a good time. I hope you will get use out of your twenty pounds.”

“I should think so, indeed.”

“But you must have spent a lot of it over that dress, and I don’t think I admire it.”

“Never mind what use I have made of the money. When I write to tell you that I am engaged, and can, perhaps, offer you a home in the future, then you will understand how useful it has been.”

Penelope was silent for a minute or two. Then, just as they were approaching the station, she said to her sister:

“Did you hear about the lost bangle?—it does seem so queer. The Hungerfords will make a great fuss about it, that I am sure of.”

“Oh, no, they won’t,” said Brenda.

“Why—have you heard anything?”

“I was talking to that nice boy who came here with his mother. They seemed quite certain that it slipped out of her hand in the train. They can’t blame anybody at the school.”

“Of course not,” said Penelope. “What *do* you mean?”

Brenda was glad that the night was dark enough to prevent her sister seeing the colour which flew to her cheeks.

“I meant nothing at all,” she said. “Only of course when things are lost, everybody gets suspected. In this case, suspicion falls upon the passengers on the line and the railway officials, so we are well out of it. Good night, Helen of Troy. Oh, to think that you—you little insignificant creature—should ever have represented her!”

The whistle of the train was heard as it approached the station. Brenda sprang from the carriage, waved a kiss to her sister, and hurried on to the platform. A minute later, she was borne out of sight, the gold bangle with its turquoise clasp lying securely in the pocket of her dress.

Chapter Nine.

Three Sisters Consult Together.

Meanwhile, at the old rectory at Harroway, the girls who were left behind were passing a day not without a certain interest. It was Nina who began all the excitement. Their father, having been disappointed at not seeing Brenda off, had gone early on a long round of parochial visits, and the three girls had the breakfast table to themselves.

Josephine insisted on pouring out tea. Fanchon quarrelled with her over this privilege and managed, in the dispute, to spill the contents of the milk jug. Nina sat quiet and thoughtful, making up a little plan in her small brain. She was really a very precocious child for her ten years.

“First come, first served!” cried Josephine in her somewhat rasping voice. “I was down first, and I took possession of the tea tray. If you don’t behave yourself, Fanchon, I shall put so much water in your tea that you won’t be able to drink it. See what a horrid mess you have made! Nina—get up and ring the bell this minute.”

“No, I won’t,” said Nina. “Get up and ring it yourself.”

“Well—how horrid!” cried Josephine, who knew that if she left her coveted post of tea-maker, it would be immediately secured by Fanchon. “I suppose we must stand this mess, and there’s only a little milk in the other jug.”

“You’re quite detestable!” said Fanchon, snapping her fingers with passion. “What a mercy it is that dear Brenda is with us on other days, or what a frightful mess we’d get into!”

“*Dear* Brenda, indeed!” cried Nina, in a scornful tone.

“Yes, you do make a fuss about her at times,” said Josephine. “But she is gone for a day—and a good thing, too. You know how cross you are often with her dictatorial ways and the silly manner in which she manages to take in poor papa.”

“I know something that you don’t know,” said Fanchon, resigning herself as passively as she could to a humble seat at the side of the breakfast table.

“What do you know, Fanchon? Oh, do tell us!” cried Nina.

“Well—I saw *the* dress last night!”

“What—the dress that Brenda went away in?”

“Yes.”

“You *didn’t* see it—she positively refused to let any of us look at it—and I thought it so beastly churlish of her!” said Nina.

“Well, she showed it to me,” said Fanchon carelessly, helping herself to a piece of bread and jam as she spoke, “and it was—oh, I tell you, girls, it was just ripping! I never saw such a beautiful creature as Brenda looked in it. I will describe it to you presently, outside in the garden, but not now. When I have a bit of fun, and a secret to tell, I like to make as much of it as possible. I suppose we’ll have a good time ourselves some day, although not at present.”

“I have something to talk about too in the garden,” said Nina; “but first I want to have a little chat with papa.”

She looked very mysterious and the other girls glanced at her, not particularly, however, troubling themselves with regard to her appearance. It was Nina’s *rôle* to be sometimes the mere baby—the most kittenish, babyish thing on earth—and at other times to be inscrutable like the Sphinx. But these things did not really matter to her sisters, who, as they expressed it, saw through her little games. On this occasion, she suddenly darted from her seat and ran out of the room. She had caught sight of the somewhat greasy coat of the Reverend Josiah, who had returned unexpectedly and was passing the window on his way to his study.

“There’s papa!” screamed Nina—“the very man I want. I’ll be back by-and-by.”

“What can she be up to now? Little minx!” said Fanchon. “Dear, dear! do you like those pink muslins, Josie? I can’t say that I do.”

“I don’t think about them,” said Josephine. “Whatever we wear, we look frights.”

“Well, sometimes—sometimes I think that dear Brenda rather likes us to look frights,” said Fanchon. “I ought not to say it, for she really has been very good to me—particularly last night—and I believe our best policy at present is to humour her up to the top of her bent. Then if she could get engaged, and were married—”

“Engaged! and married!” cried Josephine. “What *do* you mean, Fanchon?”

“Well—that is what she expects. There’s a *he* somewhere in the world who seems to want her, and she thinks he’ll be at Marshlands-on-the-Sea, and—and—it *will* be fun to watch them together. Little Nina shall creep into the bushes behind them in the evening and listen to what they are saying—what a joke that’ll be!”

“Yes, of course,” said Josephine, brightening up very much, “it’ll tell us the sort of thing that goes on and prepare us for our own turns,” she added.

Fanchon laughed.

“Girls like us sometimes have no turns,” she continued, “that’s the worst of it. Red hair and freckles *are* so hopeless—you can never dress up to them; everything depends on how you dress, and somehow, it can’t be done—at least, that is what Brenda says.”

“Would you really be glad if Brenda were to leave us?” asked Josephine.

“I think I should—*I* should be mistress here then, and of course papa, who is so devoted to her, would give her a good wedding and that *would* be sport—and we’d have to have nice frocks for that, and that would be sport too!”

“Oh, yes—on the whole it would be nice for Brenda to go, only some one else horrid might take her place.”

“Well, don’t let’s sit here any longer in this choking hot room. Let us go into the garden: we have no lessons of any sort to-day. We can get out the frills of our muslins and continue hemming them.”

“I do wonder what is keeping Nina,” said Josephine. But Nina herself had forgotten her sisters, so great was the interest of this important occasion. To begin with—she had caught dear papa. She took dear papa by the button-hole and, slipping her hand through his arm, led him into his study. The Reverend Josiah was very hot, and the study was cool. Nina was well aware which was dearest papa’s most comfortable chair, and she placed him in it, put a pillow to his head and brought him some cold water to drink, and then sat down by him without talking.

She had a little shock head of very carroty hair. That hair neither waved nor curled. It stood in stubborn awkwardness round her small face; for it was thick and short and decidedly jagged. Her face was pale, except for its freckles, and her features had the appearance of being put on by the wide palm of a very flat hand. Her eyes were minute, and she was nearly destitute of eyelashes and eyebrows. Her mouth was a little slit without much colour, but, notwithstanding her decided plainness, there was a great deal of knowingness in Nina, and she might be as dangerous a woman by-and-by as was pretty Brenda herself at the present moment.

“Father,”—she said now—“why did you come back? I thought you were going out for the whole livelong day.”

“So I did, my dear; but I had not gone a mile before I discovered that Bess had cast a shoe and I was obliged to take her to the forge to be put right. The day is uncommonly hot, and I doubt if I shall begin to call on my parishioners until the evening.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you, papa darling,” said Nina. “The parishioners don’t care to be bothered in the morning—do they, papa?”

“That is not the question, my dear,” said the Reverend Josiah. “A clergyman’s visits ought not to be spoken of as bothers. The people ought to be truly glad to have spiritual ministrations offered to them.”

“I do not understand what that means,” said Nina, patting the devoted Josiah’s decidedly fat leg. “But I do know that, if I were cooking dinner, or gardening, or any of the sort of things that poor folks do, I would be frightfully flustered if you came to see me; and I suppose, papa, what I feel, the parishioners feel.”

“No, they don’t. They hold me in much too great respect,” said Mr Amberley, looking with some displeasure at his little daughter.

“Well—p’r’aps so,” said Nina, who really didn’t care a pin about the parishioners, and whose object in sitting with her father at that moment was not concerned in the very least with them. “Papa,” she said, after a pause, “I thought when I saw you passing the window how glad you would be to have your little Nina with you.”

“And so I am, child—so I am. You are having a holiday to-day on account of—of Miss Carlton’s being away—Brenda, I mean. You must miss her terribly, my dear.”

“Oh, no, papa—I don’t miss her at all.”

“Nina—I am *shocked* to hear you speak in that tone! When I consider the expense I go to, to give you the luxury of *such* an excellent governess—such a friend—such a companion, I am *amazed* at your remarks!”

“Oh, well,”—said Nina, who did not wish to speak against Miss Carlton, for that would not do at present—“a holiday is a change to any girl, and we’re going to sit out in the garden and hem the flounces of those little cheap frocks you gave us to wear at the seaside.”

“What little cheap frocks, my dear? I am not aware that I gave you any frocks.”

“But that precious Brenda bought them for us out of your money.”

“Oh, you mean your nice cottons that you are to wear at Marshlands-on-the-Sea. Well, child, I did the best I could, and I think it is unkind of you to talk to me about cheap frocks; for when I allowed the sum of three pounds for each of my daughters, I could not afford more. It was a great, great deal of money, Nina, and so you will find yourself when you come to earn it.” Nina had just got the information she desired. But all she said was—raising solemn eyes to her father’s face:

“The frocks *are* cheap—they cost sixpence three farthings a yard!”

Mr Amberley got up impatiently.

“I have got to study a passage from Josephus,” he said, “which has puzzled me for some little time; and I don’t care a penny piece whether your frocks cost six-and-sixpence or sixpence halfpenny a yard. I don’t know what a yard means. Leave me now, Nina. I am quite cool, and shall set to work to write a specially good sermon for Sunday. The parishioners want a new sermon, for I have given them the old ones for over a year and I am in the mood to-day. Dear Brenda sometimes helps me with my sermons, but of late I have not found her amenable in that respect. She has a most lively imagination and often throws a fresh light on a text which I myself do not perceive. But go away and hem your frills, and be thankful that you have a good father who can allow you a nice sum each to buy clothes, and an excellent—most excellent governess, who devotes herself to you.”

“She will be home at twelve to-night: are you going to sit up for her?” said Nina.

“Of course I am—poor girl. Do you think I wouldn’t do what I could to show how I appreciate her—how we all appreciate her? I am going to make her a Welsh rabbit for her supper: it is the one dainty that I can make to perfection.”

“Oh, papa!” said Nina, bursting out laughing; “I don’t believe there’s a scrap of cheese in the house!”

The Reverend Josiah made no response to this, but a slightly knowing expression crossed his sandy face, and Nina had to leave him. In truth, she did not want to stay any longer, for she had got the information she desired.

The rectory at Harroway was by no means well furnished. It was a large, rambling old house. What carpets there were bore traces of wear and tear. The sofas were covered with untidy and torn chintzes. The landings had many of them bare boards destitute of any covering whatsoever; the bedrooms were *en suite* with the rest of the house. But the garden, neglected as it was, was nevertheless a source of unfailing delight. It was an old garden, and had once been dearly loved and carefully tended by a rector who cared more for his flowers than for the souls committed to his care. In his day, roses had bloomed to perfection in this old-world garden, and all sorts of plants and flowers and shrubs had adorned the alleys and had cast their shade over the walks.

This was some time ago, and the Reverend Josiah only employed a man once a week to give the garden just a sort of outside semblance of order. Nevertheless, Nature did not quite forsake the old spot. The unpruned roses still threw out luxuriant blossom, and the shrubs still bloomed and every sort of perennial flower—poppies, sweet peas, jasmine, mignonette sowed themselves and blossomed again and yet again.

Now, the children cared nothing about flowers; they regarded them as little better than weeds, for anything that could be secured without money was to them simply worthless. Neither did they care for pets. There was no dog, nor even a cat, at the rectory. But they liked to sit under the shade of the old trees and, in particular, to invade the summerhouse, which stood back in deepest shade at the far corner of the grounds.

Here, on this hot day, Nina found her two sisters with their pink muslin frills in a cloud about them, while they themselves were bending over the work. Nina appeared, severely armed with a pencil and paper. “Now,”—she said —“here I am.”

“Well, that is very evident,” remarked Fanchon. “Why don’t you sit down and do some work?” said Josephine.

“My frock hasn’t got any flounces.”

“Oh—how you will harp on that tiresome theme again!”

“I won’t—at least not for much longer,” remarked the tiresome child; “but I’ve got something to say—I mean to do a little sum.”

“A sum!—you?”

“Yes—and if I am wrong, Fanchon can help me—or you can, Josephine.”

“Not I,” said Josephine, “my head aches too badly.”

“Well, well,” said Nina, “let’s begin—I know you will help me when I ask you. We were all with Brenda, were we not, when she bought the pink muslins?”

“Why, of course we were, you stupid,” said Fanchon. “Pass me that reel of cotton, please, Josephine.” Josephine did so. Nina placed herself on a low stool and put her sheet of paper and pencil cosily on her knee.

“I know exactly,” she said, “how much muslin was bought: five yards for me, because I was not to have flounces; and

seven yards for Josephine and eight yards for you, Fanchon, because you are the tallest."

"Well, yes—I suppose that is all right," said Fanchon; but she began, as she said afterwards, to see some method in her sister's present madness.

"Now," continued Nina, "I want to cast up a sum. Five—and seven—and eight. Fanchon, do tell me how much five and seven and eight make."

"Twenty," was Fanchon's immediate reply. "Dear, dear! now I can't find my thimble!"

"Oh, Fanchon—it's rolled away into that corner."

"Pick it up, Nina."

"No," said Nina—"not yet. How much, please, does twenty yards of muslin, at sixpence halfpenny a yard, come to?"

The sum was made up by Fanchon, who was quite quick at arithmetic.

"Ten shillings and ten-pence," she replied.

"Yes, I thought so—and there were no linings of any kind got; for dear Brenda said that we could use up some of the frocks we had outgrown, for that purpose. So our three muslin frocks cost exactly ten shillings and ten-pence. It doesn't seem much for three girls, does it, Fanchon?"

"I don't know," said Fanchon, crossly. "Why will you bother us in this queer way, Nina?"

"Well—I am thinking," said Nina; "you will see my meaning after a bit. After Brenda had got the frocks and paid for them—only she did it so quickly, I can't make out how much money she put down—she bought the hats. The hats untrimmed were one shilling each, she bought a yard of white muslin to trim each and the white muslin was eight-pence a yard. She grumbled at the price. Three times eight is—"

"Oh—two shillings, two shillings!" said Josephine.

"Well, yes—that is quite right," said Nina. "Our three hats, trimmed, came to five shillings. Add five shillings to ten and ten-pence—that makes fifteen and ten-pence. Then there were our sand shoes—one and eleven-pence each —*they* came to five and nine-pence; and our gloves;—white washing gloves—don't you remember what a fuss Brenda made about them, and said that she would wash them herself for us at night, so that they would be clean every day? and I know they were only sixpence. Now then—let us count up the whole sum."

The other two girls were now immensely interested. They did count the sum, doing it wrong once or twice, but finally producing a total which could not be gainsaid, and which came out precisely at one pound, three shillings, and a penny. Nina's little white face was flushed when this great task had been accomplished.

"Can you remember any other single thing?" she asked of her sisters.

"No, there was nothing else," said Josephine.

"And did Brenda say, or did she not, that she had spent a lot of money on us, and that we must do with it, whether we liked it or not, because there was not a farthing more that could be produced?"

"Well, yes, she did," said Fanchon, "and it seemed a lot at the time—at least, I thought so."

Nina rose solemnly now from her little stool. "Girls,"—she said—"I have something to say to you. I have found Brenda out. She spent one pound—three shillings—and one penny—on *us*, and do you know how much money father gave her to spend upon us?"

"*No*," said Fanchon.

"No," echoed Josephine. "What *do* you mean, Nina? you extraordinary child!"

"Well—he told me this morning quite simply; I didn't ask him, he just mentioned it. You won't guess—it is really awful —it will put you out—it gives me a sort of lumpy, throaty feeling. He gave Brenda nine pounds! three pounds for each of us! and she must have kept back—oh, I can't make it out—it makes my head turn round—she must have bought her own *lovely blue silk*, and all her own *lovely* clothes out of our money! Oh dear! oh dear! I wouldn't have thought it of her. And to think that I am not even to have frills to my muslin frock!"

"And to think that the frocks must be pink for us!" said Fanchon. "Oh, I can't believe it."

"It is true, though," said Josephine. "She has kept back—oh dear, oh dear—how much is it? I wonder!"

Again three puzzled heads bent over the piece of paper, and at last the full enormity of the beloved Brenda's conduct was revealed to the children. She had, of their money—yes, their own money—given to them by their own father—seven pounds, sixteen shillings, and eleven-pence to account for!

"We might have been dressed like duchesses," said Nina. She burst out crying. "Oh—this *horrid* frock!" she said, and she kicked the offending pink muslin to the opposite side of the summerhouse. "I'll never wear it—*that* I won't!" she cried. "I'll disgrace her, that I will—horrid *thief* of a thing!"

As to Fanchon—she walked deliberately out of the summerhouse. With steady steps this young lady, who was very

wise for her years, approached her father's study. The Reverend Josiah was supposed to be busy with his sermon. At such times, it was considered exceedingly ill-advised to molest him. Brenda would never do it. She said that all muses ought to be respected—the sacred muse most of all. But there was no respect in Fanchon's heart just then. She opened the door with violence and—alas!—it must be owned—aroused Josiah out of a profound sleep. His head had been bent down on the historic pages of old Josephus, and sweet slumber had there visited him.

He started up angrily when detected in his nap by his eldest daughter. He would have forgiven Brenda, but Fanchon had not at all charming ways.

"My dear," he said, "you know when I am busy with my sermon that I will not be disturbed."

"Yes, papa—of course, papa," said Fanchon. "I just wanted to ask you a question, and I will go away again. How much money do you give Brenda every year to spend on clothes for us?"

"What a funny question to ask me, my dear. I have no stated sum; I give just what I can afford."

"And are you satisfied with the way your daughters are clothed, papa?" said Fanchon, kicking out a long leg as she spoke and showing an untidily shod and very large foot.

"Oh, my dear—my dear! I know nothing about ladies' dress. I can't afford silk—I wish I could; I should love to see you in silk; but in my present state, and with my poor stipend, it has to be cotton. I told dear Brenda so, and she agreed with me. Cotton in summer, and a sort of thick stuff—I think they call it linsey-woolsey, but I am not sure—for the cold days. I cannot do better, Fanchon—there is no use in your scolding me."

"I am not scolding you, papa. You gave Brenda three pounds for each of us—didn't you—the other day, to get our things for the seaside?"

"Yes, of course I did: that was the very least she said she could possibly have. I gave it to her with her own quarter's salary, which the dear girl required a fortnight in advance; there was nothing in that. Her quarter's salary was seven pounds ten, and the money for you three—nine pounds. Brenda said it was very little, but it really seemed a great lot to me, and I regret it when I think of my poor parishioners. But there's nothing cheaper than cotton—at least, I have never heard of it; of course, if there were, it would be my duty to clothe you in it."

"Did you ever hear of art muslin, papa?" asked Fanchon. "That is cheaper, but I won't disturb you any more." She went up to him and gave him a kiss. Then she left the room.

Having obtained her information, Fanchon went deliberately into the filbert walk. There she paced about for some time, her eyes fixed on the ground, her hands locked tightly together in front of her. She was not exactly depressed, but she was troubled. She was old enough to see the advantage of the revelation being arrived at which little Nina had so cleverly accomplished, and she was determined to make it in every way available for her own purposes. But to do this, she must put her sisters off the scent. At dinner time, she ate a very scanty meal. She hardly spoke to them, but, after dinner, she had a long conference with them both.

"Now, look here, Nina," she said.

"Yes," said Nina.

"I want you to make me a promise."

"Oh, I do hate promises," said Nina.

"I don't," said Josephine, "they're rather interesting; nothing cheerful ever comes in our way, and even to make a promise seems better than nothing."

"Well, the promise I want you two to make to me is this: that you won't breathe a word of what I have said to you, either to father or Brenda—that you will keep it entirely to yourselves and allow *me* to manage Miss Brenda. I think I can promise that if you do this you will both have rather pretty frocks at the seaside, and that Nina shall have her flounces. Go on finishing the pink muslins, girls, for they'll be a help, and certainly better than nothing, and let me approach Brenda to-morrow morning."

"Oh dear!" said Nina, "how clever you are! I am sure I, for my part, will be only too delighted. But how dare you?" she added. "Does it mean that you would go—and—put her in prison?"

"*I* put her in prison—you little goose! What *do* you mean? No, no! But she'll buy our clothes for us out of father's own money or—there! don't let's talk any more about it."

Josephine hesitated for a moment, then she flew to her sister's side, flung her arms round her neck, and kissed her heartily.

"I think we ought to be awfully pleased with Nina," was Fanchon's response, "for she's quite a little brick, and I tell you what it is, girls—we'll go and pick some fruit for tea and I shall send Molly for two-pennyworth of cream to eat with it; we may as well enjoy ourselves. Brenda has left a few pence with me in case of necessities. She warned me to be awfully careful, but I think she won't scold us much about the cream when I have said a few things to her I mean to say."

"Mightn't we have some currant buns?" said Nina. "I was so hungry at lunch—there didn't seem to be a scrap of meat on that bone."

“Yes—we’ll have currant buns, too. She left me eleven-pence. You can run to the village, Nina, if you like, and get the buns. Mrs Simpson must have them out of the oven by now.”

Off scampered Nina. Josephine and Fanchon had a little further conversation, and, by the time Nina returned, the whole matter with regard to Brenda and her shortcoming: was left in the elder sister’s hands.

Chapter Ten.

A Cosy Little Supper.

Mr Amberley was one of the most unsuspicious of men, but he, too, had his own slightly cunning ways. He allowed Brenda so much money each week for housekeeping, and it must be said that she kept the family on short commons. There were even times when the Reverend Josiah was slightly hungry. This being the case, and as he, in reality, held the purse-strings, he was wont to provide himself with bread, butter, and cheese and some bottles of ale which he kept in a private cupboard in his study. By the aid of these, he managed to quell his rising appetite and to sleep soundly at nights.

But Brenda knew nothing of the delicate cheese supply by this reverend gentleman, of the butter which he himself brought home from the nearest dairy, nor of the dainty bread which he slipped into his pocket on his way home from his parochial rounds. Now, however, his intention was to give the pretty little governess a charming surprise when she returned that evening. She should have that rarest of all dainties—in his opinion—Welsh rabbit, made from a receipt handed down to him by his grandmother. Accordingly, by his own clever hands, as the hour approached midnight, he put everything into preparation—the little stove on which the dainty was to be prepared (he regretted much that they must eat it on bread, not on toast), a bottle of the very best ale that could be purchased: in short, a charming little meal for two.

He had missed Brenda sorely during the day. In her presence the girls were quite delightful, but without her they were tiresome, plain, rather disagreeable girls. It was too late to take the pony to the station, but he himself would walk there in order that Brenda should come home under his safe convoy. This plan of his Brenda had not counted on. He took the precaution, indeed, not to appear on the platform, but met her just as she was emerging out of the shade of a thick wood just beyond the village. He thought how charming she looked in her white serge coat—how different from his own unruly girls. But Brenda herself was snappish and by no means inclined to respond to his kind attentions.

“I wish you had not come out, Mr Amberley. It really is ridiculous to suppose that a woman of my age,”—(Brenda was very fond of making herself appear old when she spoke to Josiah)—“a woman of my age,” she continued, “cannot walk the short distance from the station to your house.”

“But at midnight—my dear girl,” protested Josiah, “I really could not hear of it. I hope I know what is due to any girl whom I respect, and it is only a pleasure to serve you—you know that.”

“Dreadful old goose!” thought Brenda to herself.

But she saw that she must humour him. She had had, on the whole, a good day and, although she had not excited the admiration she had expected, she was the richer by a very valuable gold bangle. So she chatted as lightly and airily as she could and, when they entered the house, she even assisted to cat a tiny portion of the Welsh rabbit and to sip a little of the sparkling beer. She asked no questions, too, with regard to the manner in which Josiah got these dainties into the house. But although she said nothing, she thought a good deal and resolved to feed the good clergyman slightly better in future and not to save quite so much of the housekeeping money for her own purposes.

When she had finished supper, she yawned profoundly, protested that she could not keep her eyes open a minute longer, and, giving Josiah a scant “good-night,” ran off to bed.

When she left him, he sat for a little time musing. Brenda had managed that he should not even get a glimpse of her blue silk dress, but he had noticed the dainty hat with its perfect trimmings, the white serge coat which covered the governess’ pretty person from head to foot, and the neat and lovely white gloves. He had thought how wonderful it was that she could wear such nice things. That coat, in particular, took his fancy. It was of a wonderful material which he did not think that he recognised. Silk it was not; cotton it was not; linsey-woolsey it was not. What was it made of? It must be cheap, or poor little Brenda could not afford it. Brenda had so often and so pathetically told him how necessary it was that she should save almost every penny of her income. She used to say to him with those sweet blue eyes of hers, so different from the eyes of his own daughters, looking into his face:

“It is my duty to prepare for the rainy day. It may come, you know, and if I have not saved money, where shall I be?”

He had smiled at her on these occasions and once had even gone the length of patting her little white hand and had said that he wished all other girls were so wise. Yes, dear Brenda was saving up her poor little salary; and that nicely made white coat—of course she must have made it herself—must be composed of a very cheap material. He wondered if dresses of the same material could be got for his poor orphans. He always spoke of his children to himself as his poor orphans. They had been very tiresome orphans on the day that had just gone by—Nina in the morning, Fanchon later on. They had, it seemed to him, almost complained with regard to their clothes—those clothes which he so laboured to get them. It was annoying, very; but if they might have coats, or frocks, or whatever the article of dress was called, of the material which Brenda wore, he would feel that he had done his duty by them.

He went to bed at last, resolved to speak to the governess on the subject by-and-by. When Brenda reached her room, she first of all proceeded to lock her door. She then carefully removed her white serge coat, shook it, brushed it over

tenderly, and folded it up, with tissue paper between the folds. She then laid this elegant garment in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe. It must not be seen again until she was safe at Marshlands-on-the-Sea. Having removed the coat, she stood for a time surveying her own reflection in the cracked mirror, which, after all, was the best looking-glass the rectory could afford. She moved her head slightly to right, slightly to left; she pushed her hat in different positions, and contemplated herself with great admiration. Then, putting her hand into her pocket, she took out the beautiful little bangle and clasped it on her wrist. The bangle really gave her great finish. It seemed to raise her in the social scale. It was so absolutely good—not the least bit jim-crack. That gold was at least eighteen carat, and that exquisite turquoise must have cost a mint of money; it was just the right size for her, too. She held up her arm, and contemplated the effect of the bangle in this position. She laid her hand across her knee, and looked at it from that point of view. She arranged it and rearranged it, and loved it more and worshipped it more deeply the longer she looked at it.

At last, with a deep sigh of satisfaction, she took it off, folded it softly in some tissue paper, and, opening her purse, took from it the key of a drawer which she always kept locked. The people who surrounded the rectory, the few domestics who worked there, were all honest as the day. Had this not been the case, Brenda's drawer in her wardrobe might have been found worth robbing before now. For in it were those savings which she had secured from the housekeeping money, and that seven pounds, sixteen shillings, and eleven-pence which still belonged to the girls' wardrobes and the four five-pound notes which Penelope had sent her. In short, Brenda felt that she was quite a wealthy girl. She had not an idea of any Nemesis at hand.

She laid the stolen bracelet in a little box which had held hitherto some mock jewellery, and having locked her drawer, proceeded to take off her pale blue dress, to fold it up, put it away, to do ditto with her hat and gloves, and finally to undress and get into bed.

Brenda Carlton slept soundly that night, for she was really very tired. She was also quite hopeful and happy. But towards morning, she was disturbed by a dream. The dream was a curious mixture of Helen of Troy as she had appeared—silent and stately in the dusky wood—of Penelope, with her eyes red from crying, of her pupils and their clothes, and, last but not least, the Reverend Josiah.

It seemed to her in her dream that Josiah was exceedingly angry, that all that gentleness and suavity of manner which, as a rule, characterised him, had departed; that he was looking at her—yes, at her—with little angry eyes, and that he was accusing her of something which was very terrible and, which, try as she would, she could not disprove. She awoke from this dream trembling and with the dews of perspiration on her forehead. She started up in bed to wipe them away and, as she did so, she was aware of the fact that some one was thumping at her bedroom door.

"Yes—what is it?" she called out crossly.

"It is only me," answered the voice of her eldest pupil. "I thought you would be tired and have brought you your breakfast."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Brenda, relieved and gratified, for she really was intensely thirsty.

She sprang out of bed, unlocked the door, then, running across the room, got into bed once more and sat up, looking exceedingly pretty with her slightly flushed cheeks and befrilled nightdress of fine lawn. Fanchon entered with the breakfast tray, which was quite common, being made of iron that had once been japanned; but this decorative process had gradually been removed by the fingers of time, and Brenda was far too careful with regard to the laundry to allow extra cloths for breakfast trays or any such little dainties.

Fanchon placed the tray on a table close to Brenda's bed; then having, as she considered, performed her duty, she jumped up on the side of the bed and sat gazing at her governess. Fanchon had made all her preparations. Brenda should have food before the thunder clap fell on her devoted head. Accordingly, Fanchon Amberley began by making friendly enquiries with regard to the governess' success on the previous day.

"Drink your tea and eat your toast," she said. "There's no butter in the house—you didn't leave us money to buy any, and that egg is, I am afraid, stale. But it is the last one left from your purchases of last week. You must make the best of it, I am afraid. But never mind," continued the young lady, swinging her foot backwards and forwards, "you must have gorged so on the good things of life yesterday, that I don't suppose you are overpowered with an appetite."

"I didn't gorge," said Brenda gently. "I never gorge, as you know, Fanchon. But I am thirsty, and it is very thoughtful and kind of you, dear, to bring me up my breakfast."

Fanchon made no reply to this. Brenda poured herself out a cup of tea. She drank it off thirstily and then looked at her pupil.

"How untidy you are, my dear child."

"Am I? That doesn't matter," said Fanchon. "Tell me, Brenda, how you enjoyed yourself. Was it quite as wonderful as you expected?"

"Oh, quite, quite," said Brenda, who had no idea but of making the very best of things to her pupil.

"It was really worth your pale blue silk dress and your serge coat, and your hat, and your gloves, and your new parasol?" pursued Fanchon.

"I wish, Fanchon," said the governess, "that you would not give me an inventory of my clothes whenever you speak to me. I suppose I must be dressed like other people, mustn't I?"

“Of course,” said Fanchon. “Well, let us leave the dress alone. How did you get on with your sister? was she as nice as that dead-and-gone body—whatever her name is?”

“Oh, she was wonderful!” said Brenda, with real enthusiasm. “She has a real gift for acting, there’s no doubt of that.”

“I suppose you’ll tell us about it sometime, won’t you?”

“I am telling you now—what do you mean by sometime?”

“I mean,” said Fanchon, “that Nina and Joey and I want all the particulars, not just a few bare facts, but every little tiny incident made as full as possible; and in especial, we are anxious to know if you met any *he’s*, and if you did meet one special *he*; and in that case, what *he* said to you, and what you said to him—a sort of ‘consequence’ game, you understand. And in particular, we want to learn the compliments he paid you; for some day, when we three are dressed like you in pale blue silk, etc, we may have similar compliments ourselves. That is what we want to know.”

“What *is* the matter with you, Fanchon?” said her governess.

“Do you like your breakfast, Brenda?” was Fanchon’s response.

“Not much,” answered Brenda crossly. “The bread is stale; there is no butter, and the egg is uneatable. I must jump up at once in order to attend to the housekeeping.”

“You needn’t, really, Brenda. Joey went round to the shops this morning and ordered things in. We’re going to have a couple of ducks for dinner, and green peas—”

“What *do* you mean?” said Brenda, her eyes flashing. “A couple of ducks and green peas! You know how expensive ducks are.”

“I don’t,” said Fanchon calmly—“all I know about them is that they are good to eat and Joey has ordered them. Oh—and we’re going to have raspberry and currant pie too, and a lot of cream with it—”

“And you expect *me* to pay for these luxuries out of the housekeeping money?”

“Of course we do, Brenda—who else would pay for them?”

“But I tell you I can’t—you don’t understand how little your father gives me; it is absolutely impossible—you must countermand that order *at once*, Fanchon—go and do it this minute while I get up. I shall send cook out presently for a bit of steak, and potatoes from the garden will do; there are no peas, and it is the height of extravagance to buy them.”

“You’ll be a great deal too late, for they are all in the house; and I think cook has put the ducks in the oven. Anyhow,” continued Fanchon, suddenly changing her tone, “I don’t mean to stop either Joey or Nina. They’re buying food—proper food—for us, and you’ve got to pay for it.”

“I don’t understand you—you are exceedingly impertinent. I must speak to your father.”

“You can of course, if you like,” answered Fanchon, with great calmness, “but all the same, I don’t think you will; I’ve got something to say to you, Brenda, and it is something rather dreadful.”

“What?” said Brenda.

She longed to rouse herself into a towering passion, but she had the memory of her dream still over her, and the thought of Mr Amberley’s face with its changed and quite awful expression. She was more tired, too, than she cared to own. She found her eyes fixed upon those of her eldest pupil. What a dreadful-looking girl she was—so singularly plain and ungainly—all legs and arms, and with that truly disagreeable face! Brenda contrasted her with a girl she had seen at Hazlitt Chase, and wondered how she had endured her own position so long. And now this girl was actually bullying her—a girl not fifteen years of age!

Fanchon seemed to read some of her governess’ discomfiture and amazement; in short, she was enjoying herself mightily. It was delightful to turn the tables; it was delicious for the slave to be, even for a short time, the master. She, therefore, continued in a calm voice:

“I’d best tell you everything, and then you will know what is to be done. To begin with: I think you partly owe the discovery we have made to the fact that you, in your spirit of parsimony, would not give poor little Nina flounces to her dress.”

Brenda gasped, but was speechless.

“And,” continued Fanchon, “Nina, although she is not yet eleven years of age, is no fool, and so yesterday, when you were out of the way—you know the old proverb, ‘When the cat’s away, the mice will play,’—well, that poor little mouse, Nina, thought she would have a gambol on her own account yesterday, and Joey and I joined in. We quizzed father with great dexterity and—in short, Madam Cat!—we found you out!”

These last words were quite terrible. From Fanchon’s pale eyes a steely fire shot forth. It seemed to scorch the miserable Brenda, who shrank lower on her pillows and longed for the ceiling to fall on her.

“I,”—she began tremblingly—“I think you are quite the most impertinent—and I wish—I wish—you would go. I shall speak—to—to your dear father. I’ll just get dressed and go to him.”

Here Brenda burst into tears.

“Your tears won’t do any good, Madam Cat,” said Fanchon, “and I am not a bit impertinent, and as to telling father, why, you can tell him anything you like, after you have listened to me. The girls know that I am talking to you, so we won’t be disturbed. Now then—stop crying—you’re in my power, and you’re in Joey’s power, and you’re in Nina’s power, and the sooner you realise that fact, the better for you.” Brenda uttered a deep sigh. She thought she saw a loop-hole of hope. The girls, after all, did not matter—not greatly—whatever those impertinent little creatures had discovered. It was the Reverend Josiah whom she really dreaded, and if she were in his power, he would not have given her Welsh rabbit on the previous night, nor been so very, very kind, nor have looked at her so admiringly. If Fanchon had not gone too far, there was still hope. She, therefore, wiped her eyes and sat up.

“What is it?” she said meekly. “I am a poor prisoner at your bar, Fanchon—out with the indictment—tell the prisoner of what offence she is guilty.”

“I’ll tell you first of all what we suspect, and afterwards I will tell you what we know,” said Fanchon.

“You terrible, impertinent child—how dare you suspect me of anything!”

“We three suspect that you don’t spend all the money papa gives you for housekeeping, on the housekeeping. Cause why: We are always so dreadfully hungry and the meals are so shocking poor—and—cause why: We know that you save money for yourself in other quarters—”

“Do you think I would steal a *farthing*—of your dear papa’s money, you dreadful, dreadful—horrible child!” said Brenda.

“I don’t *think* about what I know,” replied Fanchon. “Now listen. Look at that sum.” Here she thrust a carefully made out account into Brenda’s hand. Brenda read the items, tears rushing back to her eyes and her heart palpitating wildly. The grand total of one pound, three shillings, and a penny stared her in the face. “And now,” continued Fanchon, “having discovered that this was exactly what you spent on our poor little clothes, we should like to know what you propose to do with the balance.”

“The balance, child!” said Brenda. “I haven’t a penny—not a penny over. In fact, although I wouldn’t trouble your father, you are a little bit in debt to me—I mean the gloves—I couldn’t tell you, and you had to have gloves—but *I* paid for the gloves.”

“Oh—you wicked Brenda!” said Fanchon—“you intolerably wicked woman! Nina talked to father yesterday, and father told her that he gave you three pounds for each of us, in order to clothe us for the seaside. So you have still in your possession seven pounds, sixteen shillings, and eleven-pence of our money. It’s my belief that you have spent it on your own clothes! There—you can’t deny it—we know what the things you bought cost—the miserable—horrid—*mean* things you bought! and we know what poor papa gave you, for he told Nina and afterwards I went and asked him and he told me too.”

“And does he—does he know—anything else?” asked Brenda.

“Nothing else at present, but he will soon.”

Brenda lay very still and thoughtful on her bed. After a minute she said:

“Fanchon—you are quite mistaken in me.”

“I know you thoroughly,” said Fanchon; “I always believed you to be intensely conceited, frightfully—appallingly vain, and—not too honourable. But now I also know that you are nothing more nor less than a common thief! How long do you think father would keep you in the house if he knew?”

“But—he doesn’t know, dear, dear Fanchon!”

“Not yet. We thought we’d tell you first—it seemed only fair to give you that chance.”

“How sweet of you, Fanchon.”

“But I have told you now, and I shall go straight to him this very minute and show him this little sum unless you confess the truth to me.”

“I—I—” said Brenda—“what truth?”

“Have you got seven pounds, sixteen shillings, and eleven-pence of our money in your possession? If you say no—I go immediately to father. If you say yes—why, perhaps I will wait an hour or so.”

Brenda almost smiled when Fanchon made use of the last words.

“Then,” she said in a gentle tone, “I have still got the money, for you—for you. I thought we could spend it best at Marshlands-on-the-Sea.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t,” said Fanchon—“those sort of lies won’t go down any longer with us. But as you have made a sort of confession, you may dress yourself. You won’t grumble, I think, when you come downstairs and enjoy our good dinner, and after dinner I’ll have another talk with you. It is my turn to dictate terms now, and I mean to enjoy myself.”

With this last remark Fanchon marched out of the room, wrenching the door open noisily and banging it after her. Her two little sisters were waiting on the landing.

“The cat has confessed,” she said, “and so the poor little mice may play as much as they like. Not a word to dad—we’d have no fun if he knew—we can do exactly what we like with her now.”

Josephine clapped her hands. Nina enquired if the ducks and green peas and raspberry and currant tart, with unlimited cream, had been mentioned.

“Oh, yes; and we shall enjoy our dinner—poor starved creatures,” said Fanchon.

The three girls tripped downstairs. The old rectory was already full of the odorous smell of roast duck. Mr Amberley perceived it in his study. He slightly sniffed, and thought of toasted cheese. He felt pangs of hunger which, as a rule, he was not accustomed to. The girls were flying about: they seemed in high spirits.

“What a delightful day it is,” thought the rector to himself, and he shut up the musty old Josephus with a bang and decided to give an old sermon for the sixth time of hearing to his parishioners on Sunday, and not to worry any more about a new one until the hot weather was over. He even went to the length of standing by the open study window and looking across the sun-flecked garden.

Presently, he saw his daughters entering the house with trailing flowers of all sorts and descriptions in their arms. He wondered what could be up. Josephine, who had a certain knack for the arrangement of dinner tables, was laying a white cloth on the board. In the centre she placed billowy piles of green art muslin which she had bought that morning in the village—or rather, put down to the housekeeping account. Rows of sweet peas and carnations were then placed in bowls in the centre of the table and, this handiwork having been completed, Josie rushed up to her room to put on the best dress she possessed. In short, the entire place wore a festive air.

“It’s because dear Brenda has returned,” thought the rector.

He felt the difference without observing it. But when sharp little Fanchon appeared and led him into the dining-room and he beheld with his own eyes two plump birds waiting to be carved, and saw the green peas, and the new potatoes, and the apple sauce, and the different accompaniments of young ducks, he forgot everything in the joy of gratifying his appetite.

The three girls were waiting—no servant ever attended at meals,—their faces were flushed with delight. The rector did not even ask, “Where is Brenda?” He flopped down into his seat, said grace, and began to carve the birds.

Brenda entered in a pale green cotton dress, which suited her lissom young figure to perfection. She took her seat meekly. The girls did not speak to her, but the rector addressed her with enthusiasm.

“My dear,”—he said—“what a delicious feast we are having, and how very good of you to manage it out of the housekeeping money. I know—my dear Brenda—that I give you far too little; but my stipend, my dear, is so small, and the needs of my poor so considerable—”

“There’s raspberry tart and cream coming on,” said Nina, “so let’s hurry up with the ducks.”

The rector placed the first delicious morsel between his lips. Brenda made a gentle remark to the effect that she was glad she had pleased him. Nina gave a groan; Joey kicked her sister’s foot; Fanchon tried to look stately, but failed. Notwithstanding all these things, however, the three girls and their father thoroughly enjoyed the excellent dinner.

“I feel a new man,” said Mr Amberley, when it was over. “It is wonderful how supporting really tasty food is. My dear Brenda, I thank you.”

She bowed to him—a mocking light in her eyes which he did not observe.

Chapter Eleven.

Reaction.

It was after dinner that Fanchon approached her governess.

“I hope you enjoyed your dinner,” she said.

“Yes; it was very good,” said Brenda.

“When do you feel inclined to have a chat with me?” pursued Fanchon.

“Not just at present,” answered Brenda.

“But you’d better be quick about it, for we mean always to live well in the future. Joey and I think that we might order a crab for supper to-night—papa loves crabs.”

Brenda was silent.

“When can we have our talk?” continued Fanchon.

“Well, I don’t think just at present; will you give me until evening? Order what you wish to-day, but don’t be too

extravagant, you'll only have an illness. I give you plain food, for it is really best from every point of view, and your father's allowance of housekeeping money is very limited."

"I can ask him, of course, what he does give," said Fanchon.

"No, no; don't do that—"

"And," continued Fanchon, as though she had not heard the last remark, "I can find out what the butcher's bills, and the green grocer's, and the grocer's come to per week. I shall be rather clever about these things in future."

Brenda made no reply. After a minute's pause, she said:

"Would you really like me to leave you?"

"I think, on the whole, I should very much."

"You would wish to give up going to Marshlands-on-the-Sea?"

"No—that would be a disappointment."

"You can't go there without me."

"Oh—I suppose we could get some one else."

"There is no one else whom your father would trust."

Fanchon was silent and a little thoughtful.

"I have a plan to propose to you, Fanchon," said her governess suddenly; "but I shall not propose it now—I will keep it until to-night. To-night, at ten o'clock, come to my room and I will talk to you. In the meantime, tell the other girls that for to-day, just for to-day, they may do as they please. Now let me be alone; I have a headache."

Fanchon danced off to communicate this news to her sisters.

"The cat's caving in like anything," she said. "We shall have a jolly, jolly time in future!"

"What can we have to eat at tea-time?" was Nina's remark.

"Oh—you little goose," exclaimed Fanchon, "you can't possibly be hungry yet."

"But I shall be hungry when tea-time comes."

"Well, get what you like, both of you."

"Let's go to the shops this blessed minute," said Nina, turning to Josephine.

They started off arm in arm. They did not mind the fact that they were wearing their only white frocks—their Sunday-go-to-meeting frocks, and that Nina's was already sadly stained with some juice from the raspberry tart. They did not mind the fact also that they had outgrown these frocks, and that the people stared at the rector's daughters when they were at all respectably attired. They were too excited to think of anything but the victory they were having over old pussy-cat—which was their present name for their hitherto beloved Brenda.

They went to the shops where Brenda dealt, and ordered rich plum cake for tea, two sorts of jam, some more fruit and some more cream; and for supper they ordered crabs—two crabs to be sent up dressed, from the fishmonger's, also a lobster, and also a large plate of prawns. Having thus wilfully expended money which might have kept the rectory on its ordinary *régime* for weeks, they returned home in the best of spirits.

'Tis a little sad to relate that even mice, in their moments of triumph over their legendary foe—the domestic cat—may sometimes overdo things. For two of these little mice felt decidedly ill that night from the direful effects of overeating. Nina spent that night, which she had felt would be of such triumph, rolling from side to side in bed and crying out with pain, and Josephine had the most appalling succession of nightmares. But Fanchon was more moderate in her eating and, therefore, did not suffer. She had her work cut out for her; and that evening, at the appointed hour—regardless of Nina's cries and Josephine's frightened exclamations in her sleep—she went off to interview her governess in her bedroom.

Brenda was waiting for her, and was quite ready. She had been frightened, terribly frightened, in the morning, but she was alarmed no longer. She had been given time to think, to consider, to form her plans. The discovery which those tiresome children had made was altogether most unpleasant. Had it been made by older people, it would almost have been dangerous. But Brenda felt that she could manage the children. She must sacrifice something, it is true, but she need not sacrifice everything.

The girls had never been trained in high principles. They had been brought up anyhow. The rector was not a specially admirable man. It is true, he lived according to his lights, but these did not carry him far. His children were motherless, and it did not occur to him to suspect the girl into whose care he placed them. He was devoted to his poorer parishioners, and was kindness itself to them, denying himself many things for their benefit. But it was his object in life to do what he could for his orphans, and he thought he had done so when he put such a pretty, charming girl as Brenda Carlton over their heads. He believed fully in Brenda, and admired her immensely. He thought her a truly Christian young woman; for she was regular in her attendance at church, and always looked—he considered—so sweet and interested when he preached to her. It was wonderful how he found himself preaching

directly to her, Sunday after Sunday, suiting his words to her need and thinking of her as he addressed, or was supposed to address, his congregation.

As to the children's education, he expected them to go to Sunday school; but as their teacher there was no other than Brenda herself, it cannot be said that they gained much by this special instruction.

Brenda looked very pretty when she taught her class. Most of the time she told them good little stories, which they listened to when they were not too restless, and when Brenda herself was not too charmingly attired. On the whole, the girls were ripe for a fall, and Brenda had no compunction in saving herself at their expense. These three girls had, however, a considerable amount of character, and, strange as it may seem, the one the governess most dreaded was the youngest. For Nina was exceedingly fearless, and also rather cunning, and Brenda was not quite certain that if she gave her word she would keep it. The governess felt pretty sure that she could manage Fanchon and Josephine, but Nina was different. All things considered, however, she had to make the best of a bad job, and if she could only get through that happy time at Marshlands-on-the-Sea, she felt convinced that all would be well with her in the future. She, accordingly, welcomed Fanchon now with a smile, and immediately took the lead.

"Just for all the world," repeated Fanchon afterwards when she gave her sisters a partial account of this interview, "as if *she* were in the right and I was her little culprit at the bar!"

"Sit down, dear Fanchon," said Brenda. "Take this cosy seat by the open window—isn't the night very warm?"

"Yes—very," said Fanchon.

She took the proffered seat and the governess placed herself on the window ledge near by.

"We shall enjoy our time at the sea," said Brenda, "shall we not?"

Fanchon did not answer. She was gazing in surprise at Brenda, who, prettily dressed in soft white muslin, looked more charming even than usual.

"The cool sea breezes will be so refreshing," continued the governess—"I am picturing the whole scene. I am going to be, of course, very particular with regard to Josie and Nina; but you, Fanchon, who are so tall for your age, can come out with me in the evening and listen to the band and—and—partake of any sort of fun that is going on."

"Can I really?" said Fanchon, her eyes sparkling, and, for a minute, she forgot that she was really the judge and Brenda the criminal.

"Of course you can, dear; I mean you to have a good time."

"But can't we settle that afterwards?" said Fanchon. "The other thing has to be arranged first, hasn't it?"

"What other thing, my dear?"

"Oh, Brenda—you know—don't pretend that you forget. I gave you a fright—a big fright—this morning, and you—you cried. What are you going to do about the money? you have it—you know, and it isn't yours, it's ours."

"I have it, of course," said Brenda, "I have not denied it. I told you that I thought of spending it at Marshlands; there'll be sure to be nice shops there, and we can see the things that'll be suitable. You don't suppose, you poor children, that you can manage with only those pink muslin dresses—that would never, never do—I had no such thought, I assure you."

"But," persisted Fanchon, "you said this morning that you had spent all the money on us, and that we owed you for the gloves. Oh, how knowing you are, Brenda, but you have overstepped the mark this time, and poor papa, if he knew—"

Brenda lowered her eyes. She had very thick and very curling jet-black lashes, and they looked sweet as they rested against her blooming cheeks. Fanchon could not help noticing them and, further, she could not help observing the gentle smile that played round her lips.

"Now, listen," said Brenda. "I want to confide in you. You can believe in me or not—just as you please. I cannot possibly force your belief, nor can I force you to do anything but what you wish. I am, to a certain extent, in your power, and in the power of the other two girls. You can tell your father, and he will dismiss me, and—I shall be ruined —"

"Oh, I don't suppose papa will be so very hard with you. He's quite fond of you, you know," said Fanchon.

"He would be terribly severe," said Brenda. "He is a dear good man, but he would be terrible, fearful, if you told him —you three—what you have found out. I tell you, Fanchon, why he would be so fearful. Because I have done what I have done entirely for the sake of deceiving him."

"Oh dear! dear! Then you are even more wicked than I thought," said Fanchon.

"Listen—the position is a very strange one. I seem to forget, as I am talking to you, that I am your governess, and that you and your sisters are my little pupils, but the facts are those: I look upon you, Fanchon, as very much older than your years. You have, in many ways, the mind of a grown-up woman. Of course you are very young, quite unformed, but you will be grown up sooner than most girls; and you have an understanding way, and I think you will follow me now if I try hard to explain myself."

“I wish you would begin,” said Fanchon then, restlessly, “you do so beat about the bush. You said this morning that you hadn’t a penny over, and that we owed you for the gloves; and then, afterwards, you confessed that you had something over—an awful lot over—and that you meant to spend it at Marshlands. You told one lie, anyway.”

“Yes, I told one lie, anyway,” responded Brenda, intense sadness in her tone. “I told one dreadful, wicked lie, and I am very, *very* sorry—”

“Oh, I wonder if you are!”

“Yes, I am—I am; that was why I cried that time.”

“It wasn’t—you cried because you were in a funk.”

“Fanchon, my dear child, your blunt words hurt me exceedingly.”

“Well, well,” said Fanchon, kicking one leg against the wainscoting as she spoke—“do go on, hurry up—won’t you? We’ll forget about the lie number one, and remember that you have confessed to having the money. We’ll even try to believe that you meant to spend it on us at Marshlands. Go on from that point, do.”

“I will explain things to you,” said Brenda. “You know your dear father is very ignorant with regard to dress. His simplicity on these matters is most sweet, but at times it almost provokes a smile. Now, if I had spent three pounds on each of you in the little shops at Rocheford; and if Nina, and Josephine, and you—my dear Fanchon, in your silly way—had lost your heads over the pretty things I had bought, he would have been dreadfully startled and would have accused himself of great extravagance in giving you so much money, and when the next occasion came when my dear little pupils wanted pretty clothes, I should have had nothing like as much to spend on you. So your Brenda was—well—cunning, if you choose to call it so, and determined to outwit dear papa; and quite resolved that her little pupils should be charmingly attired at a place where he was not likely to see them.” Fanchon did not speak at all for a minute. After a pause, she said:

“And *that* was your reason for keeping back the money?”

“Certainly—just to deceive your poor papa; for *his* good, dear—for his good, and for yours.”

“You’re awfully clever, Brenda,” was Fanchon’s next remark.

Brenda coloured.

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

“Because—because—I know it. You made up that story to-day when you were by yourself, and it’s wonderfully clever—it really is. I suppose you think that we girls believe you.”

“You’ll believe in your pretty frocks, and nice hats, and nice shoes and charming gloves, and also in the little treats at the different tea shops which I mean to give you all out of dear papa’s money—”

“That is, of course, if we don’t tell,” said Fanchon. “Oh, you can please yourself about that,” said Brenda. “You can tell, and everything will be at an end. I shall go away from here; I will give him back the money—I have it in that drawer—and he will take my poor little character as well, and I’ll wander forth into the world, a desolate and ruined girl. You won’t go to the sea—you’ll stay at home. You’ll have your victory. In a few weeks a horrid, elderly governess with spectacles, and perhaps with a squint, will come here. I’m sure your father will be afraid to get any one young and—and—pretty—again. When *she* comes, she will give you—”

“Beans!” said Fanchon. “I know the sort—I—I don’t want a horrible thing like that in the house.”

“No—poor Brenda is better than that, isn’t she?”

“Oh, Brenda, you *are* so clever,” laughed Fanchon. When Brenda heard that laugh, she knew that her victory was assured.

“My dear girl,” she said, “believe me or not; that was my real reason for keeping back the money, and your terrible little Nina can keep an account of all that I spend at Marshlands, and satisfy her wise, *odious* little head with the fact that I am not holding back one penny for myself. She can do that, and you can all have a good time. Now—what do you say?”

“It sounds—if you had not told that first lie—it sounds almost as if it could just be believed,” said Fanchon.

“It can be acted on, whether it is believed or not,” remarked Brenda.

Fanchon was silent. Brenda watched her narrowly. “I have something to say to you,” she remarked, all of a sudden. “Of course you won’t speak to your papa and get me dismissed, and lose all your own fun—no three girls would be so mad. But I have something more to say. I want *you*, Fanchon, to be my friend.”

“Oh—I!” said Fanchon—“but mice are never friendly with cats, are they?”

“You mustn’t think of me as a cat, dear, nor of yourself as a mouse. The simile is very painful, and you know how I have talked to you about the pleasant time I trust to have at Marshlands; and you shall help me, and look very, very smart when you come out with me in the evenings. Do you remember my telling you that if you are my friend, I might get you a little bangle to wear?”

“Oh, yes—but I am certain it would be a horrid gilt thing not worth anything.”

“Fanchon—you *are* unkind! I told you in the utmost confidence that I had been left a tiny legacy—a little, *little* sum of money, very precious to poor me, but very small. Well, I did not forget my pupil, and I have bought her a bangle.”

“Oh, Brenda, *have* you?”

“Yes, dear; and it is made of the *best gold* for the purpose—*eighteen carat gold*! You must on no account tell the others a single *word* about it; but I will give it you sometimes to wear when you and I go out by ourselves in the evenings. It shall shine on your little wrist then, Fanchon, and—how *sweet* you will look in it!”

“Oh—but may I see it?” said Fanchon, her lips trembling as she spoke.

“Not until you most faithfully promise that you will not say a word about it to the other girls. There are, occasionally, times when I may even want to wear it myself. But it will belong to you—it will be *your* property, and when we come back from the sea, I will present it to you absolutely. Make me a faithful promise that you will say nothing about the bangle, and you shall constantly wear it when the others are not looking on—and—when we return, it shall be *yours*!”

“Oh, I promise,” said Fanchon. “I expect I was a sort of a brute this morning—I didn’t understand you could be *so* kind. Are you making a fool of me, Brenda—do you mean what you say?”

“Of course I mean what I say. You faithfully promise?”

“I *do*—indeed—indeed; and I will explain things to the others, and I’ll force them to believe me—they generally do everything that I wish. You *will* buy us all the lovely clothes, won’t you, *darling* Brenda!”

“I have said so, Fanchon.”

“And you *will* take me out in the evenings when the other two are in bed?”

“Most certainly I will.”

“Then I *will* promise *everything*—I will be your friend through thick and thin, and I’m awfully sorry I was cross to you and—and disbelieved you. Of course, I see that dear papa has to be managed; he is so funny about our dress—so different from other men.”

“Your father is a most saint-like man, and you must never say that he is funny, for that is not right. But saint-like men have to be managed in this unsaintlike world, that is all, dear—every woman understands that, she wouldn’t be worth her salt if she didn’t.”

“Please, please show me the bracelet,” said Fanchon. Then Brenda went to the drawer where her treasures were and took out the little old box where her false jewellery had reposed, and where now the beautiful bangle lay in all its pristine freshness. She hated beyond words to see Fanchon even touch it, but she felt that she had to pay this price to secure her own safety, and she even permitted the girl to clasp it round her wrist, and to look at it with the colour flaming into her cheeks and the light of longing in her dull eyes.

“Oh—isn’t it just—*too* perfect!” said Fanchon.

“Be my friend and it shall be yours when we return from the sea. I bought it for you—for *you*; real, real gold too, of the best quality—and such an exquisite turquoise! You needn’t be ashamed to wear this *wherever* you appear—even when, by-and-by, you are married to some rich, great man, you can still wear the little bracelet—the very best of its kind. See, I will write your name now before your eyes on the little box.” Brenda took up a pencil and hastily wrote the following words on the back of the box: “Fanchon Amberley’s gold and turquoise bracelet.”

“Why don’t you say that you have given it to me?” said Fanchon.

“No, no—I can add that by-and-by. If people happen to ask you the story about it, it may not be wise for it to appear that such a beautiful thing was given to you by a poor governess. Well now, here it is back again in the drawer, and you can go to bed, Fanchon. You are a very rich girl, and I am not quite as bad as you painted me, am I?”

“No, no!” said Fanchon, who was completely won over, “you’re a darling!”

“Not a cat,” whispered Brenda—“not a horrid pussy-cat?”

“No—a darling, and my friend,” said Fanchon and then she left the room a little giddily, for the thought of the bracelet seemed to weigh her down with uncontrollable bliss; she scarcely understood her own sensations.

Chapter Twelve.

A Terrible Alternative.

Nina was very poorly the next day and was forced to stay in bed. She could not eat any of the good things which had been provided for breakfast, and thought of herself as a much abused little martyr.

Brenda’s conduct to this naughty, greedy child was all that was exemplary. She gave her proper medicines and saw that her bedroom was made comfortable, and came in and out of the room like a ministering angel—as Mr Amberley said.

Soon after noon, Nina was better, and as she had not the slightest idea what had taken place between Fanchon and her governess the night before, she said somewhat rudely to that pretty young woman, who was hemming some of the Reverend Josiah's handkerchiefs as she sat by the bedside:

"Do go away please, Brenda, and send Fanchon to me."

Brenda gave an angelic smile and immediately complied. A few minutes later Fanchon entered the room accompanied by Josephine.

"Oh, you are better, are you?" said Fanchon, regarding her younger sister with small favour. "Well—I hope you have received your lesson and won't eat unlimited plum cake again, and finish off with lobster and crabs."

"I hate l-lobsters and crabs!" moaned the victim. "They make me so s-sick—horrid things!"

"Well, you're better now, so forget about them," said Fanchon.

"Yes—I am better; *she*—the cat—she says that I am to have gruel for dinner! I *don't* want it—horrid thing!"

"Serves you right, say I!" cried Fanchon.

"Oh, please, Fanchon," said Nina, whose tears had trickled weakly forth, for she had really been rather bad, "don't scold me, but tell me what you have arranged with Cat last night."

"She's not a cat—we made a mistake about that," said Fanchon.

"What on earth do you mean now, Fanchon?" exclaimed Josie.

"She explained things to me. She's very good-natured, and very wise."

"Very ill-natured and only *self*-wise!" exclaimed Josie.

"No, no—you don't know!" and then Fanchon proceeded to explain to both her sisters all about that wonderful point of view which Brenda, in her cleverness, had managed to impress on her mind. The money was kept back on purpose. It was on account of dear papa and dear papa's eccentricity. The money would be spent at Marshlands, and Nina, if she liked, could keep accounts.

"She cried about it, poor thing!" said Fanchon. "She admits, of course, that the money is there for us, and she will buy us just what we want and give us a good time, and some treats besides in the different tea shops. She really was awfully nice about it."

"Oh, Fanchon," said Josephine, "you are taken in easily."

"No, I'm not—I didn't believe her myself at first."

"You mean to say you do now?" said Nina.

"Y-yes, I do now."

Notwithstanding her weakness, Nina laughed.

"Well, then—I don't—do you, Joey?"

"I?" said Josephine. "I believe her less than ever. She is found out, and she means to save herself by spending the money on us. She's a worse old cat than ever—that's what *I* call her."

"Well—of course," said Fanchon, "you can tell papa—she told me last night that I could."

"It's the right thing to do," said Nina.

"Well, I don't think so. I believe her—I really and truly do. She confesses she told that lie about not having money, for she wished to have the thing a secret until we got to the seaside; but that is the whole of her offending. Of course you, girls, can tell papa, but it'll be very serious, particularly as that awful Miss Juggins has come home to live with her mother."

"What in the wide world has Miss Juggins to do with it?" exclaimed both sisters.

"Well—she's out of a situation, and papa is safe and certain to get her to come to us. It was Brenda herself who spoke of her last night. She did not mention her name, but she must have had her in her mind. She is between forty and fifty if she's a day, and she wears spectacles and has a cast in her eye and she's a perfect terror. If we get poor Brenda away, we don't go to the sea, and Juggins comes. It's because of Juggins that I believe in Brenda—it is really."

This frank avowal of the cause of her belief had a great influence on the other girls. Josephine sat quite still, evidently in deep thought. Nina lay back against her pillows.

"It would be awful to have Juggins!" she said, after a pause, "she would be worse than Brenda."

"She would be honest, though," said Josephine.

"Oh, yes—that she would. But think of our fun and—and—we know enough about Brenda now to force her to give us

a good time."

"I think, girls, we had best accept the situation," was Fanchon's final judgment.

Whatever the other girls might have remarked, and whatever their resolve would have been, must be left partly to conjecture. But something occurred at that moment to cause them to come altogether to Fanchon's point of view; for, just at that instant, there was a tap at Nina's door, and who should walk in but—Miss Jemima Juggins herself!

She came close up to Nina's bedside, and asked abruptly where the Reverend Josiah was.

"Why are you lying in bed, you lazy child?" she said. "What is the matter?"

Now certainly Miss Juggins made a great contrast to pretty Brenda, and, when she removed her blue glasses and fixed her rather crooked eyes on Nina, Nina made up her mind on the spot to believe in Brenda, in Marshlands, in the pretty clothes which were yet to be bought, in a good time by the sea.

"I will go and find papa," said Fanchon. "I know he'll be glad to see you, Miss Juggins."

"I hope he will, indeed," said Miss Juggins. "I have come to speak to him on business. I want a new situation. How untidy your room is, girls! Shameful, I call it—three great hulking lasses like you not to be able to keep your own bedroom straight! But get your father at once, please, Fanny."

"My name is Fanchon," said that young lady. "Fanny—I prefer to call you; I hate French names." Fanchon withdrew. The Reverend Josiah was discovered, and was borne up to little Nina's room. Miss Juggins was seated by the bed.

"How do you do!" she said when the rector entered. "You don't mind my finding my way about this house, I hope, Mr Amberley, seeing that I knew your sainted wife so well. I came to ask you if you could find me a situation. This child is a little ill from overeating, and ought to get up and take a good walk. I will go down with you to your study, Mr Amberley, for I must have a private talk. Good-bye, children. Take my advice, and tidy up your room. Really, Rector, you don't bring your girls up at all in the way their dear mother would have liked."

The door slammed behind Miss Juggins. The girls looked at each other.

"We mustn't get rid of Pussy-cat," said Nina then. "*She* would be fifty times worse. Well, I'll keep the sums awfully carefully, and I'll—"

"You'll have to believe in her, you know, and try to be agreeable," said Fanchon.

"Oh—any fate in preference to Juggins!" was Josephine's remark.

Chapter Thirteen.

A Surprise Invitation.

On the morning after the prize-giving day at Hazlitt Chase, Penelope rose with a headache. There was a great deal of bustle and excitement in the school, for nearly all the girls were going to their several homes on that special morning. Penelope and Mademoiselle d'Etienne would have the beautiful old house to themselves before twenty-four hours were over.

Penelope did not in the least care for Mademoiselle; she was not especially fond of her school life, but she detested those long and endless holidays which she spent invariably at Hazlitt Chase.

To-day all was in disorder. The usual routine of school life was over. The children were some of them beside themselves with the thought of the railway journey and the home-coming in the evening. Somebody shouted to Penelope to hurry with her dressing, in order to help to get off the little ones. The smaller children, including the two little Hungerfords, were to go in a great omnibus to the station and be conducted by a governess to their different homes in various parts of England.

Pauline Hungerford suddenly rushed into the room where Penelope was standing.

"Helen of Troy," she said.

"Oh, please don't!" said Penelope. "I am *not* Helen of Troy—I don't wish to be called by that odious name."

"But you *were* so beautiful!" said little Pauline. "Do you know that while we were looking at you, even Nellie forgot about her bracelet; but she's crying like anything over the loss of it this morning. It is quite too bad."

"Yes, indeed it is," said Penelope. "I do trust your mother will take steps to get it back. I hear that some of the railway officials were supposed to have stolen it."

"Oh dear," said Pauline, "how wicked of them! What awful people they must be! Who told you that, Penelope?"

"Well, it was mentioned to me by my sister, who came here yesterday. You saw her, of course?"

"Yes—she was talking a lot to my brother. She is very pretty; of course—of course I saw her. And she says it was the railway people who stole it? I will tell mother that the very instant I get back. But oh, please, Penelope, Honora wants you; she said you promised to go to her room before ten, and she would be so glad if you would go at once—will

you?”

“Yes, I will go,” said Penelope.

She had forgotten Honora’s words, being absorbed in her own melancholy thoughts. It now occurred to her, however, that she might as well keep her promise to the pretty girl who ought to have been Helen of Troy. She went slowly down the passage, tapped at Honora’s door, and entered her bedroom. The young lady was just dressed for her journey. She wore dainty white piqué and a pretty hat to match. She looked fair and fresh and charming.

“I am just off—I have hardly a minute,” she said. “I want to ask a great favour of you, Penelope.”

“What is that?” said Penelope.

She spoke ill-naturedly. She felt the contrast between them. She almost disliked Honora for her beauty on this occasion.

“It is this,” said Honora. “I have been asking mamma—and she says I may do it. Will you come and stay with us for part of the holidays?”

“I!” said Penelope—amazement in her face.

“Yes. We live at Castle Beverley: it is not very far from Marshlands-on-the-Sea.”

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Penelope, clasping her hands. “Why, it is there my sister is going.”

“Then of course you can see her; that will be nice. But will you come? I will write to fix the day after I get home. I *should* like you to have a good time with us. We shall be quite a big party—boys and girls, oh,—a lot of us, and I think there’ll be no end of fun. The little Hungerfords are coming, and Fred. Fred is such a nice boy. Will you come, Penelope? Do say ‘Yes.’”

Penelope’s eyes suddenly filled with tears.

“Will I come!” she said. “Why, I’d just love it beyond anything. Oh, you *are* good! Do you ask me because you pity me?”

“Well—yes, perhaps a little,” said Honora, colouring at this direct question—“but also because I want to like you. I know you are worth liking. No one who could look as you did last night could be unworthy. It was after I saw you that I asked mamma; and she said: most certainly you should come. It will probably be next week: I will write you fixing the day as soon as ever I get home. And now, I must be off. Good-bye, dear. You may be certain I will do my very utmost to give you a really happy time.”

Honora bent her stately head, pressed a little kiss on Penelope’s forehead, and the next minute had left her. Penelope’s first impulse had been to rush downstairs; but she restrained herself. She sat down on Honora’s vacant bed and pressed her hand to her forehead.

“Fun for me,”—she thought—“for me! I shan’t have lonely holidays. I shall go to one of the nicest houses in England, and be with nice people, good people, true people. There’s Brenda—of course I wish—I do wish Brenda were *not* at Marshlands; but I suppose I *can’t* have everything. I wish—I wish I could understand Brenda. Why did she force me to get all that money for her? I wonder if any of the girls who gave it me will be there. Well, well—I won’t be disagreeable—I am going to have a jolly time—I, who never have any fun. Oh, I am glad—I am very glad!”

About an hour later, the great house of Hazlitt Chase seemed quite silent and empty. Except for some housemaids who went to the different rooms in order to fold up the sheets and put away the blankets and take the curtains down from the windows and generally reduce the spotless, dainty chambers to the immaculate order of holiday times, Penelope did not see any one. She was glad that Mademoiselle d’Etienne was not in sight. She thought she could endure her holiday now that she had something to look forward to, if only Mademoiselle were not with her. But she could not stand the housemaids: they were so full of gossip and noise. Their accustomed reverence for the young ladies was not extended to the lonely girl who always spent vacation at Hazlitt Chase.

Penelope put on her hat, seized the first book she could find, and went out into the open air. The grounds still bore traces of yesterday’s revels. There was the wood—dark, cool, and beautiful—which had been used for that scene in which she took so distinguished a part. Penelope’s first desire was to get within the shade of the wood; but then she remembered how many things had happened there; how it was there that she had made terms with the girls with regard to the conditions on which she would act Helen of Troy. It was there, too, that Honora Beverley had found her when the play was over—when she was feeling so wrought up, so desolate, and, somehow, so ashamed of herself. She did not want to go into the wood. She walked, therefore, down one of the sunny garden paths, and at last came to a grassy sward with a huge elm-tree in the middle. There was shade under the elm. She eat down on the grass and opened her book. But she was not inclined to read. Penelope was never a reader. She had no special nor strong tastes. She could have been made a very nice, all-round sort of girl; her brain could have been well developed, but she would never be a genius or a specialist of any sort. Nevertheless, she had one thing which some of those girls who despised her did not possess; that was, a real, vibrating, suffering, longing, and passionate soul. She longed intensely for love, and she would rather be good than bad—that was about all.

She sat with her book open and her eyes fixed on the flickering sunlight and shade of the lawn just in front of her. After all she, Penelope, would have a good time—just like the other girls. She would come back to school able, like the other girls, to talk of her holidays, to describe where she went and what companions she found and what friends she made; to talk as the others talked of this delightful day and that delightful day. Oh, yes—she would have a good

time! She pressed her hand to her eyes and her eyelids smarted with tears. It had been a very long time since Penelope had cried. Now, notwithstanding her sudden and unlooked-for bliss, there was a pain within her breast. She was terribly—most terribly disappointed in Brenda. She had not seen Brenda for a long time, and she had always rather worshipped her sister. When a little child, she had thoroughly revelled in Brenda's beauty. When the time came that she and Brenda must part, little Penelope had sobbed hard in her elder sister's arms—had implored and implored her not to leave her, and afterwards, when the separation had taken place, had been sullen and truly miserable for a long time.

Then she had been admitted to Mrs Hazlitt's school on those special conditions which came to a few girls and had been arranged by those governors who put a certain number on the foundation terms of the school. The foundation girls were never known to be such by any of their companions. They were treated exactly like the others. In fact, if anything, they had a few more indulgences. Not for worlds would Mrs Hazlitt have given these children of poverty so cruel a time as to make their estate known to their companions.

But, it so happened that Penelope was obliged always to spend her holidays at the school. That was the only difference made between her and the others. She had not seen Brenda for years. But Brenda had written to her little sister and had made all use possible of that sister's affection. She had worked up her feelings with regard to her own dreadful poverty and, in short, had got Penelope to blackmail four girls of the school for her sake.

"It was a dreadful thing to do," thought Penelope to herself, as she sat now under the shade of the elm-tree. "I don't think I'd have done it if I'd known. I wonder if she really wanted the money so very badly. There's some one who loves her, and she must look nice for his sake. But all the same—I wish I hadn't done it, and I wish she were not going to Marshlands-on-the-Sea. For she is just the sort to make it unpleasant for me, and to expect the Beverleys to ask her to Beverley Castle; and oh—I am disappointed in her!"

Again Penelope cried, not hard or much, for this was not her nature, but sufficiently to relieve some of the load at her heart. Then, all of a sudden, she started to her feet. Mademoiselle d'Etienne was coming down the central lawn to meet her. Mademoiselle was in many respects an excellent French governess, but had the usual faults of the proverbial Frenchwoman. She was both ugly and vain. She could not in the least read character, but she had the knack of discovering which was the girl whose acquaintance was most worth cultivating.

Mrs Hazlitt had made a mistake in introducing this woman into the school. She had not interviewed her in advance, and was altogether disappointed when she arrived. It was her intention to get another French governess to take her place at the beginning of next term. Mademoiselle had, in fact, received notice to this effect and was exceedingly annoyed. She was in that state when she must vent her spleen on some one, and, as Penelope was the only girl now at Hazlitt Chase, she went up to her crossly.

"What are you doing here, *mon enfant*?" she cried. "You leave the poor French mademoiselle all alone—it is sad—it is strange—it is wrong. Come this minute into the house. I have my woes to relate, and I want even a *petite* like you to listen. Come at once, and sit no longer under this shade, but make of yourself a use."

Penelope rose, looking more grim and forbidding than usual. She followed Mademoiselle up the garden, past the wood, and into the house.

"Behold the desolation!" cried Mademoiselle, when they got indoors. She spread out her two fat, short arms and looked around her. "Not a *petite* in sight—not a sound—the whole mansion empty, and Madame gone—gone with venom! She have left me my dismissal; she say, 'You teach no more *les enfants* in this school.' She gave no reason, but say, 'I find another and you teach no more!' Who was that spiteful and most *méchant enfant* who reveals secrets of poor Mademoiselle to Madame?"

"I don't know," said Penelope. "I hadn't an idea you were going. I know nothing about it," she continued. "Aren't we going to have any lunch? I am so hungry."

"And so am I," cried Mademoiselle, who was exceedingly greedy. "I starve—I ache from within. *Sonnez, mon enfant*—I entreat; let us have our *déjeuner*—my vitals can stand the strain no longer."

Penelope rang the bell, and presently a towsled-looking housemaid appeared, to whom Mademoiselle spoke in a volley of bad English and excellent French.

"Get us something to eat," said Penelope, "that is what we want. Isn't Patience here to wait on us as usual?"

Patience was one of the immaculate parlour maids.

"No," said the girl; "Patience has gone on her holiday."

She withdrew, however, quickly after making this remark, for Mademoiselle's eyes flashed fire.

"I suffer not these tortures," she cried, "and the insolence of English *domestiques*! I return to my own adorable land and partake of the *ragoûts* so delicate and the *bouillon* so fragrant and the *omelettes* so adorable. I turn my back on your cold England. It loves not the stranger—and the stranger loves it not!"

A meal was hastily prepared in another room, and Penelope and the governess went there together.

"What I dread," said Mademoiselle, "what I consider so *triste* and execrable—is that I should remain here in this so gloomy climate, far, far from my beloved land, with you—the most *ennuyeuse* of all my pupils during the time of holiday. I call it shameful! I rebel!"

"Then why do you stay?" said Penelope.

Again Mademoiselle extended her fat hands and arms.

“Would I lose that little character which is to me the breath of existence?” she enquired. “Were Madame to know that I had left you, my *triste* pupil, all alone during these long days and weeks, would she give me a paper with those essential qualifications written on it which secure for me employment elsewhere?”

“I am going away myself next week,” said Penelope, bluntly.

“Next week!” cried Mademoiselle, much startled and delighted at this news. “But is that indeed so? for Madame say nothing of it. She say to me this morning: ‘You take excellent care of my pupil, Penelope Carlton, and give her of the food sufficient, and of the mental food also, that she will digest.’”

“I won’t digest any of it,” said Penelope, bluntly.

“That was my thought, but I dared not express it. I knew well the dulness of your intellect, and although last night you did soar into a different world—*ma foi*, you did take me by surprise!—you are yourself a very *triste* little girl—an *enfant* indistinguishable, with neither the gifts of beauty nor of genius.”

“Well—I am going—it is arranged. Mrs Hazlitt will doubtless be written to.”

“And where do you go, *pauvre petite*?” asked the governess.

“I am going to stay with Honora Beverley, at Castle Beverley,” replied Penelope, with even a touch of arrogance in her small voice.

Mademoiselle opened her eyes wide.

“With her!—my pupil *magnifique*, and so beautiful! She has the air distinguished and the manner noble. She belongs to the rich and to the great. *She* takes *you* up—but *pourquoi*?”

“Kindness—I suppose,” said Penelope. “I am lonely, and they have a big house; I am going there.”

“It is wonderful,” said Mademoiselle, “you of all people. Honora is one with thoughts the most lofty, and she signifies a preference for you! It is strange—it gives me *mal à la tête* even to think of it!”

“Why should it?” asked Penelope.

“Do I not know some of your ways, *mon enfant*—and that little, little transaction in the wood?”

“What in the world do you mean?” said Penelope, turning ghastly white.

“Ah! I mean no wrong. I have eaten enough of your odious English cookery; let us rise from table. I am glad to feel that you are going to that friend so unsuitable—to that lady so *supérieure*. Would she ask you if she knew what I know?—”

“I can’t tell, I am sure, what you do know,” said Penelope; “but what I feel at present is that I want rest—you’re not obliged to follow me about all the afternoon—may I stay by myself until supper time?”

“Ungrateful!” cried Mademoiselle. “But I shall go—I need you not. I have myself to attend to, and my affairs so sombre to settle. I will meet you again at the hour of supper, when I have put matters in train for myself.”

Penelope left her. How much did Mademoiselle know? She disliked her heartily, and did not want to trouble her head too much over the circumstance. She felt certain that the four girls who had given her the money would not confide their secrets to any one, far less to Mademoiselle, whom they distrusted. Nevertheless, the governess was scarcely likely to speak as she had done without reason. She was evidently jealous of Penelope’s invitation to Beverley Castle, and was very angry at being dismissed from Hazlitt Chase.

“She can’t by any possibility know the truth,” thought the girl, “and I won’t fret about it. I will just humour her as best I can until next week arrives, and then say good-bye to her for ever. I am heartily glad she is leaving the school; I never liked her so little as I do now.”

Now, Mademoiselle D’Etienne and Brenda Carlton would have made their fortunes by ways that deceived. There was a great deal of affinity in their insincere natures. With Mademoiselle, it was truly bred in the bone; but she was not altogether ill-natured, and, after considering matters for a short time, decided that, unless special circumstances turned up, she would not disturb Penelope’s chance of having a good time at Castle Beverley. Her jealousy of the girl died down and she thought of herself and her own circumstances. Then it occurred to her that she would perhaps make some use of her pupil’s unexpected absence from Hazlitt Chase. If Penelope went to Castle Beverley for several weeks of the holidays, it would surely not be necessary for Mademoiselle to stay in that mansion so *triste*, so desolate. Mrs Hazlitt was the soul of kindness. Mademoiselle was in her employ, and earning a considerable salary until the middle of September. It might be possible that Mrs Hazlitt could find some amusement for the poor lonely girl who was banished from her native land. Where could she go? what could she do to relieve the heavy air of England, to take the oppression from her heart? It would be more than delightful if she, too, could have an invitation to Castle Beverley, and, just for a minute, it entered her head that she might manage this by means of that little secret which she held over Penelope.

But, after all, the secret was not so intensely valuable. What she knew was simply this. She had observed Cara Burt opening a letter on a certain morning and taking an unexpected five-pound note out of it. Mademoiselle was avaricious. The sight of the money had awakened desires within her. What could a girl like Cara want with anything

so precious as a five-pound note in term time? She resolved to question her.

“How good your people are to you!” she said.

Cara had asked the governess what she meant, and the governess had prettily replied in her broken English that she had seen the “note so valuable” in Cara’s hand when she opened the letter.

“Oh, that is for a purpose—an important one,” answered Cara. Then she bit her lips, for she was sorry she had said so much. But other girls had received their money on the very same day and Mademoiselle, alert and auspicious, had crept to the *rendezvous* where they all met. Poor Penelope! When Penelope received the five-pound Bank of England notes, Mademoiselle’s dark, wicked face was peering from behind the shade of a magnificent oak tree. The girls themselves did not perceive her. She was much elated with her discovery and resolved to enfold it, as she said, within her breast for future use.

Now, it occurred to her that she might simply relate to Penelope what she had done, or rather tell her pupil enough to show her that she was in the secret. That very evening, when the two had finished their supper she began her confidence. She told the girl that she had not wished to injure her, but at the same time that she knew for a fact that she had received four five-pound notes from four different girls of the school.

“To me it is extraordinary,” she said, “why they should give to you the precious money, but that they have done so is beyond doubt. I go by the evidence of these eyes at once piercing and true! Do you deny it, *mon enfant*? Do you dare to be so *méchante*?”

“I admit nothing and deny nothing,” said Penelope, as calmly as she could speak.

Mademoiselle laughed. After a long pause, she said:

“I am a nature the most generous, and I would not hurt a hair of the head of my pupil. You will go and enjoy the festival and the time so gay and the friends so kind at Castle Beverley, and that *enfant* so *magnifique*, Honora Beverley, will be your companion. I could prevent it, for she is, with all her nobleness, fanatical in her views, and of principles the most severe.”

“I will never ask you to keep anything back,” said Penelope. “You can write to Honora if you wish: I don’t know how you can say anything about me without maligning yourself.”

“Ah—mademoiselle I do you think I could so injure you?” said the governess. “That would indeed be far from my thoughts. But if I have the consideration the very deepest for you, will you not assist me to have a less *triste* time than in this lonely house with even you away?”

“What can I do?” asked Penelope, in surprise. “I am a rather friendless girl, how can I possibly assist you to have a gay time? I never yet had a gay time myself, this is the first occasion.”

“And it fills you with so great delight?”

“I am very glad,” said Penelope.

“I write this evening,” said Mademoiselle, “to Madame, and I mention to her the fact that my one pupil departs on the quest of pleasure, and I ask her to liberate me from my *solitaire* position here and to perhaps do me a little kindness by assisting me to spend the holiday by the gay, bright, and charming sea. A little word thrown in from you, too, mademoiselle, might do much to influence Madame to think of the poor governess. Will you not write that word?”

Penelope hesitated for a minute. Then she said, bluntly:

“I will mention the fact that you will be quite alone, and I will write myself to Mrs Hazlitt to-night.”

As she spoke, she got up, and left the room. Penelope hated herself for having to write the letter. She longed more than ever for the moment when she would be free to go to Castle Beverley. She was not really afraid of Mademoiselle. She would rather all the girls in the school knew what she had done than be, in any respect, in Mademoiselle’s power. In fact, such a strange revulsion of feeling had come over her, that she would have told the truth but for Brenda. But, although she was deeply disappointed in Brenda, it was the last wish in her heart to do anything to injure or to provoke her.

Accordingly, she wrote a careful and really nice letter to her headmistress, telling her what Honora had said, and begging of her to allow her to accept the invitation, when it arrived. She also said that Mademoiselle d’Etienne would be quite alone, and seemed put out at the fact of her going. At the same time, she begged that the thought of Mademoiselle would not prevent Mrs Hazlitt’s allowing her to accept the invitation.

Penelope’s letter was duly put into the post, accompanied by one of much persuasiveness from the French governess. The result of these two letters was, that as soon as the post could bring replies, replies came. Mrs Hazlitt said that she would be delighted to allow Penelope to go to Castle Beverley, and that as she knew the house would be full of gay young people, she enclosed her a five-pound note out of a fund which she specially possessed for the purpose, to allow the girl to get a few nice things.

“Mademoiselle will help you to purchase these,” she said, “and you can have all your school frocks nicely washed and done up in the school laundry. I am afraid I cannot spend more on your dress, Penelope, but I think you can manage with the money I send you.”

Mademoiselle’s cheeks were flushed when she devoured the contents of her own letter; for enclosed in it was a

cheque so generous that her eyes blazed with pleasure.

“Madame is of the most mean, and yet of the most generous!” she cried. “She allows me to go when you go, *petite*, and she gives me a little sum to spend on myself, so that I make a holiday the best that I can. I knew where I will reside. I will go to that place near Castle Beverley—I forget its long name—but it is gay, sad on the sea.”

“You’re not going to Marshlands?” cried Penelope, in some alarm.

“That is the place that I will go to,” said Mademoiselle. “I have looked it out on the map, and it is far off, but not too far off. There I can watch over you, although it is the distant view that I will obtain, and I can, from time to time, see my other most beloved pupil, and perhaps go to Castle Beverley, and wish them adieu before I depart to that land of sun—*la belle France*.”

Penelope did not at all like the idea of Mademoiselle’s going to Marshlands. She hoped she would not come across Brenda, and she trusted sincerely that she would not be invited to Castle Beverley. But, as Mademoiselle was determined to have her own way, Penelope resolved to take the good which lay at hand, and not to trouble herself too much about the future.

Mademoiselle was now extremely good-natured, and helped Penelope to renovate her very simple wardrobe and, in short, made herself as charming as a Frenchwoman of her character knew how. All in good time, Honora’s delightful letter of invitation arrived, and Mademoiselle resolved to travel with her pupil as far as Marshlands.

“I part from you,” she said, “at the railway station where you will meet your friends so distinguished; and I, the governess, the foreigner, will go to search for *appartements* that are cheap. You will bid me farewell, and permit me to shake the hand once again of my pupil Honora. Ah! but I am kind to you—am I not?”

“Yes,” murmured Penelope, feeling all the time that Mademoiselle was unbearably trying. The joys, however, of going to Castle Beverley should not be damped even by this incident.

The girl and the Frenchwoman travelled second-class together, and arrived at the somewhat noisy station of Marshlands-on-the-Sea between six and seven o’clock on a glorious evening in August Penelope had not beheld the blue, blue sea since she was quite a little girl, and her eyes sparkled now with delight. She looked quite different from the limp and somewhat uninteresting girl she had appeared to every one at Hazlitt Chase. The anticipation of happiness was working marvels in her character. Penelope had taken good care not to inform Brenda of the day of her arrival. She was quite sure she would have to meet her sister; but she would at least give herself a little rest before the encounter took place. She rejoiced, too, in the knowledge that up to the present Mademoiselle d’Etienne and Brenda did not know each other.

As soon as the train drew up to the platform, Mademoiselle poked out her head and uttered a little shriek when she beheld Pauline and Nellie Hungerford, as well as Honora herself and a tall footman waiting on the platform. Mademoiselle rushed up to Honora, taking both her hands and shaking them up and down while she burst into an eager volley of French, in which she informed that “pupil best beloved” that the desire to be near her had brought her to Marshlands-on-the-Sea, and that she was even now going with her humble belongings to seek apartments appropriate to her means.

“I meet you, my pupil,” she said, “with a joy which almost ravishes my breast, for sincere and true are my feelings towards you. And now I stay not, but perhaps some day you will think of the governess in her humble *appartements* by the lone sea, and allow her to pay you a little visit.”

Honora murmured something which scarcely amounted to an invitation. Mademoiselle turned to the little girls, and Honora ran to Penelope’s side.

“I am so glad to see you! I hope you are not frightfully tired. Oh, you do look hot and dusty, but we shall have a delicious drive up to the Castle. My home is quite outside the town, which is somewhat noisy. Ah, I see Dan has collected your luggage; shall we come at once? Good-bye, Mademoiselle. I hope you will secure nice rooms.”

Mademoiselle was flattering, and full of charm to the end. She insisted on marching down the platform with Pauline’s hand clasped in one of hers, and her humble little bag in the other. She did not part from her pupils until she saw them all ensconced in the luxurious carriage which was to bear them rapidly into the pleasant country. But, when that same carriage had turned the corner and she found herself alone, an ugly expression crossed her face.

“It is not good to have these feelings,” she murmured to herself. “I like not the jealousies when they come to devour; but why should Penelope with her schemes and her behaviour the most strange be taken to the very heart of the best of all my pupils? I will see into this by-and-by. Meanwhile—*ma foi*—how hot it is!”

Chapter Fourteen.

The Castle.

Castle Beverley was even a more delightful place than Penelope had the least idea of before she arrived at it. She had her own vivid imagination, and had pictured the old castle, its suites of apartments, its crowds of servants, its stately guests, many and many a time before the blissful hour of her arrival. But when she did get to Castle Beverley, she found that all her pictures had been wrong.

It is true, there was an old castle, and a tower at one end of an irregular pile of building; but the modern part of the house, while it was large, was also unpretentious and simple.

The children who ran to meet the carriage were many of them Penelope's schoolfellows. Mrs Beverley had a charming and placid face and a kindly manner. Mr Beverley was a round-faced, rubicund country squire, who made jokes about every one, and was as little alarming as human being could be. In short, it was impossible for Penelope not to feel herself at home. Her old schoolfellows welcomed her almost with enthusiasm. They had not cared for her greatly when at Hazlitt Chase, but they were just in the mood to be in the best temper with everything, and had been in raptures with her rendering of Helen of Troy. Honora, too, had pictured, very pathetically, the scene of the lonely girl afterwards weeping by herself in the wood, and the delightful inspiration which had come over her to give her some weeks' holiday at Castle Beverley. Perhaps Cara Burt would have preferred her not being there, but Mary L'Estrange, who was also a visitor at the Castle, had quite forgiven Penelope for her desire to obtain five pounds. She put it down altogether, now, to the poor thing's poverty, and hoped that the transaction would never be known. Annie Leicester had not yet arrived, but was expected. Susanna, the most to be feared, perhaps, of the four girls who had given Penelope the money, had gone abroad for the holidays.

Thus, all was sunshine on this first evening, and when Penelope found herself joking and repeating little bits of school news and some of the funny things which had occurred between herself and Mademoiselle, the others laughed heartily. Yes, that first evening was a golden one, long to be remembered by the somewhat lonely girl.

When she went to bed that night, she was so tired that she slept soundly until the morning. When the morning did arrive, and she was greeted by a smiling housemaid and a delicious cup of tea, she felt that, for the time at least, she was in the land of luxury.

"I'll enjoy myself for once," she thought, "I'll forget about school and that I am very poor and that I am disappointed with Brenda, and that Brenda is staying at Marshlands, and Mademoiselle, too, is staying at Marshlands. I will forget everything but just that it is very, very good to be here."

So she arose and dressed herself in one of the new white linen dresses which Mademoiselle had purchased for her out of Mrs Hazlitt's money, and she came down to breakfast looking fresh and almost pretty.

"You do seem rested—I am so glad!" said Honora. "Oh, no, we are not breakfasting in that room. Father and mother and the grown-ups use the front hall for breakfast in the summer, and we children have the big old school-room to ourselves. You didn't see it last night; we had so much to show you, but it is—oh—such a jolly room. Come now this way, you will be surprised at such a crowd of us."

As Honora spoke, she took Penelope's hand, and, pushing open a heavy oak door, led the way through a sort of ante-chamber and then down a corridor to a long, low room with latticed windows, over which many creepers cast just now a most grateful shade. There were several boys and girls in the room, and a long table was laid, with all sorts of good things for breakfast. Amongst the boys was Fred Hungerford and a younger brother called Dick, and there were three or four boys, brothers and cousins of Honora herself. There were altogether at least thirteen or fourteen girls. The two little Hungerfords flew up to Penelope when they saw her. They seemed to regard her as their special friend.

"Honora," said Pauline, "may we sit one at each side of Penelope and tell her who every one is and all about everything? Then she'll feel quite one of us and be—oh—so happy!"

"That's an excellent idea, Pauline," said Honora. "Here, Penelope, come up to this end of the table, and I'll jog the children's memories if they forget any one."

So Penelope enjoyed her first breakfast at Castle Beverley, and could not help looking at Honora with a wonderful, new sensation of love in her eyes. Honora, whose dazzling fairness and stately young figure had made her appear at first sight such an admirable representative of the fair Helen of the past, had never looked more beautiful than this morning.

She wore a dress of the palest shade of blue cambric and had a great bunch of forget-me-nots in her belt. Her face was like sunshine itself, and her wealth of golden hair was quite marvellous in its fairness. Her placid blue eyes seemed to be as mirrors in which one could see into her steadfast and noble mind. All her thoughts were those of kindness, and she was absolutely unselfish. In fact, as one girl said: "Honora is selfless: she almost forgets that she exists, so little does she think of herself in her thought for others."

Now, Honora's one desire was to make Penelope happy, and Penelope responded to the sympathetic manner and kindly words as a poor little sickly flower will revel in sunshine. But Pauline presently spoke in that rather shrill little voice of hers:

"We *are* happy here: even Nellie's better, aren't you, Nellie?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Nellie. She looked across the table at Pauline, and gave half a sigh and half a smile.

"Of course you are happy, Nellie," said Honora. "You're not thinking any more about that bracelet, are you?"

"I do wish I could get it back," said Nellie, "but, all the same I am happy."

"But please, Penelope, tell us about your sister," said Pauline. "Oh, do you know—"

"Yes—*do* tell us that!" interrupted Nellie.

"Why, Fred saw her yesterday at Marshlands-on-the-Sea," continued Pauline. "She's quite close to us—isn't it fun? Fred came back quite interested in her—he thinks her so very pretty!"

"Whom do I think pretty, Miss?" called out Fred from a little way down the table. "No taking of my name in vain—if you please."

“You know, Fred,” said Pauline, in her somewhat solemn little voice, “that you think dear Penelope’s sister sweetly pretty.”

“I should think so, indeed!” said Fred, “and, by the way, she is at Marshlands. She had three of the funniest little girls out walking with her yesterday that you ever saw in your life. Did you know she was going to be at Marshlands, Miss Carlton?”

“Yes,” said Penelope, feeling not quite so happy as she did a few minutes ago.

“We’ll ask her up here some day to have a good time with us, dear, if you like,” said Honora.

“Thank you,” replied Penelope, but without enthusiasm.

“I spoke to her yesterday,” said Fred. “She really did look awfully nice; only they were the rummest little coves you ever saw in all your life—the children who are there.”

“They are her pupils; they’re the daughters of a clergyman,” said Penelope.

“I don’t care whose daughters they are, but they go about with your sister, and they *do* look so funny. I told her you were coming and she gave me her address. Would you like to go in to see her this morning?” Penelope trembled.

“Not this morning, please,” she said.

She felt herself turning pale. She felt she must have one happy day before she began to meet Brenda. She had a curious feeling that when that event took place, her peace, and delight in her present surroundings would somehow be clouded. Brenda was so much cleverer than she was, so gay, so determined, so strange in many ways. Oh, no; she would not go to see her to-day.

“If you like,” said Honora, observing Penelope’s confusion, and rather wondering at it, “I could send a note to your sister to come up to-morrow to spend the day here. We’re not going to do anything special to-morrow, and mother always allows me to ask any friends we like to the Castle. We have heaps of croquet courts and tennis courts, and the little girls could come with her, for of course she couldn’t leave them behind. How would that do, Penelope? Would that please you?”

“I don’t know,” said Penelope. Then she said, somewhat awkwardly:

“Oh, yes—yes—if you like—”

Honora had a curious sensation of some surprise at Penelope’s manner; but it quickly passed. She accounted for it by saying to herself that her friend was tired and of course must greatly long to see her only sister.

“She’s not absolutely and altogether to my taste,” thought Honora, “but I am just determined to give her the best of times, and we can have the sister up and the funny children for at least one day. What’s the good of having a big place if one doesn’t get people to enjoy it?”

It was just then that Nellie said:

“I do wish, Penelope, you had not done one thing.”

“What is that?” asked Penelope, who had hardly got over the shock of having Brenda so soon with her.

“Why did you bring Mademoiselle to Marshlands? We don’t care for Mademoiselle, do we, Pauline?”

“No, indeed,” said Pauline, “and she took my hand yesterday and clutched it so tight and wouldn’t let it go before I pulled two or three times, and oh! I’m quite positive sure that she’ll find us out, and I wish she wouldn’t!”

“Frankly, I wish she wouldn’t too,” said Honora, “but I do not see,” she added, “why Penelope should be disturbed on that account—it isn’t her fault.”

“No, indeed it isn’t,” said Penelope, “and I wish with all my heart she hadn’t come with me to Marshlands-on-the-Sea.”

When breakfast was over, all the young people streamed out into the gardens with the exception of Honora and Penelope.

“One minute, Penelope dear,” said Honora. “Just write a little line to your sister and I will enclose one, in mother’s name and mine, inviting her to come up with the children to-morrow. Here are writing materials—you needn’t take a minute.”

Penelope sat down and wrote a few words to Brenda. For the life of her, she could not make these words cordial. She hardly knew her own sensations. Was she addressing the same Brenda whom she had worshipped and suffered for and loved so frantically when she was a little girl? Was it jealousy that was stealing into her heart? What could be her motives in wishing to keep this sister from the nice boys and girls who made Castle Beverley so charming? Or was she—was she so mean—so small—as to be ashamed of Brenda? No, no—it could not be that, and yet—and yet—it was that: she was ashamed of Brenda! The children she was now with belonged to the best of their kind. Penelope had lived with people of the better class for several months now and was discerning enough to perceive the difference between gold and tinsel. Oh, was Brenda tinsel; Brenda—her only sister? Penelope could have sobbed, but she must hide all emotion.

Her letter was finished. She knew how eagerly Brenda would accept and how cleverly she would get herself invited to the Castle again, and again, and again. Honora's cordial little note was slipped into the same envelope. Penelope had to furnish the address, and, an hour later, Fred and his brothers, who were going to ride to Marshlands in order to bathe and to spend some hours afterwards on the beach, arranged to convey the invitation to Brenda which poor Penelope so dreaded.

"Now we have that off our minds," said Honora, "and can have a real good time. What would you like to do, Penelope? You know you must make yourself absolutely and completely at home. You are one of us. Every girl who comes here by mother's invitation is for the time mother's own daughter and looked upon as such by her. She is also father's own daughter and, I can tell you, he treats her as such, and the boys are exactly in the same position. We're all brothers and sisters here, and we love each other, every one of us."

"But would you love a girl, whatever happened?" asked Penelope, all of a sudden.

"Oh, I don't know what you mean—whatever happened—what could happen?"

"Nothing—of course—nothing; only I wonder, Honora. I never seemed to know you at all when I was at school. I wonder if you could love a girl like me."

"I love you already, dear," said Honora. "And now, please, don't be morbid; just let's be jolly and laugh and joke; every one can do just what every one likes—this is Liberty Hall, of course. It's a home of delight, of course. It's the home of 'Byegone dull Care';—oh, it's the nicest place in all the world, and I want you to remember it as long as you live. I am so glad mother allowed me to ask you! Now then, do see those youngsters, Pauline and Nellie, tumbling over the hay-cocks: how sunburnt they are! such a jolly little pair! I am sorry about Nellie's bracelet; the loss of it makes her think too much of that sort of thing. I am quite afraid she will never find it now. What would you like to do, Penelope? You looked so happy when you came downstairs, but now you're a little tired."

"I think I am a little tired," said Penelope. "I think for this morning I'd like a book best."

"Then here we are—this is the school library: every jolly schoolgirl's and schoolboy's story that has ever been written finds its way into this room. Run in, and make your choice, and then come out. The grounds are all round you—shade everywhere, and pleasure, pleasure all day long."

Chapter Fifteen.

The Seaside.

Brenda and her three pupils had arrived two or three days before at Marshlands-on-the-Sea. It cannot be said their lodgings were exactly "chic," for the Reverend Josiah could not rise to apartments anything approaching to that term. He had given Brenda a certain sum which was to cover the expenses of their month's pleasure, and had told her to make the best of it. Brenda had expostulated and begged hard for more; but no—for once the Reverend Josiah was firm. He said that his suffering parishioners required all his surplus money, and that the girls and their governess must stay at the seaside for five guineas a week. Brenda shook her head, and declared that it was impossible; but, seeing that no more was to be obtained, she made the best of things, and when she arrived at Marshlands just in the height of the summer season, she finally took up her abode at a fifth-rate boarding-house in a little street which certainly did not face the sea.

Here she and her pupils were taken for a guinea a week each, and Brenda had the surplus to spend on teas out and on little expeditions generally. She was careful on these occasions to be absolutely and thoroughly honest. She even consulted Nina on the subject. She was exceedingly polite to Nina just now and, at the same time, intensely sarcastic. She was fond of asking Nina, even in the middle of the *table d'hôte* dinner, if she had her pencil and notebook handy, and if she would then and there kindly enter the item of twopence three farthings spent on cherries,—quarter of a pound to eat on the beach,—or if she had absolutely forgotten the fact that she was obliged to provide a reel of white and a reel of black cotton for necessary repairs of the wardrobe. How Nina hated her pretty governess on these occasions! how her little eyes would flash with indignation and her small face looked pinched with the sense of tragedy which oppressed her, and which she could not understand.

The commonplace ladies who lived in the commonplace boarding-house were deeply interested in Nina's extraordinary talent for accounts. They gently asked the exceedingly pretty and attractive Miss Carlton what it meant.

"Simply a little mania of hers," said Brenda, with a shrug of her plump white shoulders, for she always wore *décolletée* dress at late dinner and her shoulders and arms were greatly admired by the other visitors at the boarding-house. Nina began to dread the subject of accounts. Once she forgot her notebook and pencil on purpose, but Brenda was a match for her. She asked her in a loud semi-whisper if she could tot up exactly what they had expended that day, and when Nina replied that she had left the notebook upstairs, she was desired immediately to go to fetch it. The little girl left the room on this occasion with a sense of almost hatred at her heart.

"Fetch that odious book! oh dear, oh dear!" She wished every account-book in the world at the bottom of the sea. She wished she had never interfered with Brenda. She wished she had never made that terrible little sum on the day when Brenda went to Hazlitt Chase. She was being severely punished for her anxiety and her sense of justice. Brenda had determined that this should be the case, and had given her small pupil a terrible time while she was spending that seven pounds, sixteen shillings, and eleven-pence on extra clothes for her pupils.

She took them into a fashionable shop, for, as the money had to be spent, she was determined that it should be done

as quickly as possible. As she could not save it for herself, she wanted to get rid of it, it did not matter how quickly. Therefore, while Fanchon stood transfixed with admiration of her own figure in a muslin hat before a long glass, and eagerly demanded that it should be bought immediately, it was poor Nina who was brought forward to decide.

“It is becoming,” said Brenda, gazing at her pupil critically; “that pale shade of blue suits you *to perfection*; and that ‘chic’ little mauve bow at the side is so very, very *comme il faut*. But that is not the question in the very least, Fanchon—whether it becomes you or not. It is this: can we afford it—or rather, can Nina afford it? Nina, look. Can you afford to allow your sister to buy that hat?”

The serving-woman in the shop very nearly tittered when the plain, awkward little girl—the youngest of the party—was brought forward to make such a solemn decision. Nina herself was very sulky, and, without glancing at the hat, said:

“Yes, take it, I don’t care!”

“Very well, darling,” said Brenda. “You can send that hat to Palliser Gardens—9, Palliser Gardens,” she said to the attendant. “Nina, enter in your account-book twelve shillings and eleven-pence three farthings for Fanchon’s hat.”

“I want one like it!” cried Josie.

“Oh—I’m sure Nina won’t allow that!” exclaimed Brenda.

“*I* don’t care!” said Nina.

In the end each girl had a similar hat, and Nina had to enter the amounts in her horrible little book. The hats were fairly pretty, but were really not meant for little girls with their hair worn in pigtails. But the only thing Brenda cared about was the fact that a considerable sum of Mr Amberley’s money was got rid of.

“Now,” she said, “we’ll consider the dresses.” And the dresses were considered. They were quite expensive and not pretty. There were also several other things purchased, and Nina grew quite thin with her calculations. All these things happened during the first days of their stay at Marshlands-on-the-Sea. But now the toilets were complete.

It was on a scorching and beautiful morning after Brenda, becomingly dressed from head to foot in purest white, had taken her little pupils in check dresses and paper hats down to the seashore, had bathed there and swum most beautifully, to the delight of those who looked on, and had returned again in time for the mid-day meal, that she found Penelope’s letter awaiting her. It was laid by her plate on the dinner table. She opened it with her usual airy grace and then exclaimed—her eyes sparkling with excitement and delight:

“I say, girls—here’s a treat! Our dear friends, the Beverleys, have invited us all to spend to-morrow at the Castle. We must accept, of course, and must drive out. Mrs Dawson,”—here she turned to the lady who kept the boarding-house—“can you tell me what a drive will be from here to Castle Beverley?”

“Five shillings at the very least,” replied Mrs Dawson.

She spoke in an awe-struck voice. There were no people so respected in the neighbourhood as the Beverleys, and Mrs Dawson—a well-meaning and sensible woman—did not believe it possible that any guest of hers could know them.

“Really, Miss Carlton,” she said, “I am highly flattered to think that a young lady who stays here in my humble house—no offence, ladies, I am sure—but in my modest and inexpensive habitation, should know the Beverleys of Castle Beverley.”

“We don’t know them!” here called out Josie.

Brenda gave Josie a frown which augured ill for that young lady’s pleasure during the rest of the day. She paused for a minute, and then said modestly:

“It so happens that my dear sister is a special friend of the eldest Miss Beverley. They are at the same school. My sister is staying at the Castle at present, and I have had a letter inviting me to go there for to-morrow. It will be a very great pleasure.”

“Very great, indeed,”—replied Mrs Dawson—“a most distinguished thing to do. We shall all be interested to hear your experiences when you return in the evening, dear Miss Carlton. Hand Miss Carlton the peas,” continued the good woman, addressing the flushed and towsled parlour maid.

Brenda helped herself delicately to a few of these dainties and then continued:

“Yes, we shall enjoy it; my dear sister’s friends are very select. I naturally expected to go to Castle Beverley when I heard she was there; but I didn’t know that the Beverleys would be so good-natured as to extend their invitations to these dear children. Even the little accountant, Nina, is invited. Nina, you’ll be sure to take your book with you, dear, for you might make some little private notes with regard to the possible expense of housekeeping at Castle Beverley while you are there. You, dear, must be like the busy bee; you must improve each shining hour—eh, Nina? eh, my little arithmetician?”

“I am *not* your arithmetician; and I—I hate you!” said Nina.

These remarks were regarded by the other ladies present as simply those of a naughty child in a temper.

“Oh, fie, Miss Nina!” said a certain Miss Rachael Price. “You should not show those naughty little tempers. You should say, when you feel your angry passions rising, ‘Down, down, little temper; down, down!’ I have always done that, and I assure you it is most soothing in its effects.”

“But you wouldn’t if you were me,” said Nina, who was past all prudence at that instant. “If you had an odious—odious!” here she burst out crying and fled from the room.

“Poor child! What can be the matter with her?” said a fat matron who bore the name of Simpkins, and had several children under nine years of age in the house. “Aren’t you a little severe on her, Miss Carlton? Strikes me she don’t love ’rithmetic—as my Georgie calls it—so much as you seem to imagine.”

Brenda laughed.

“I am teaching my dear little pupil a lesson,” she said. “That is all. I have a unique way of doing it, but it will be for her good in the end.”

Soon afterwards, the young lady and her two remaining pupils left the dinner table and went up to their shabby bedroom, which they all shared together at the top of the house. Nina was lying on her own bed with her face turned to the wall. The moment Brenda came in she sat up and, taking the account-book, flung it in the face of her governess.

“There! you horrid, odious thing!” she said. “I will never put down another account—never—as long as I live! There—I won’t, I won’t, and you can’t make me!”

“I am afraid, most dear child,” said Brenda, “I should not feel safe otherwise. I might be accused of dishonesty by my clever little Nina when I return to the dear old rectory and to the presence of your sweetest papa. But come, now—let’s be sensible; let’s enjoy ourselves. We will drive out to Castle Beverley to-morrow, of that I am determined, even though it does cost five shillings. But we’ll walk back in the evening—that is, if they don’t offer us a carriage; but I have a kind of idea that I can even manage their extending their favour to that amount. It is all-important, however, that we should arrive looking fresh. Now, girls—this is a most important occasion, and how are we to be dressed?”

Nina said that she didn’t know and she didn’t care. But Josie and Fanchon were immensely interested.

“There are your muslin hats,” said Brenda—“quite fresh and most suitable; and your little blue check dresses. The check is very small, and they really look most neat. They’re not cotton, either—they’re ‘delaine.’ Dearest papa will be delighted with them, won’t he? He’ll be quite puzzled how to classify them, but I think we can teach him. You three dressed all alike *will* look *sweet*, and you may be thankful to your dear Brenda for not allowing you to racket through your clothes beforehand. Well, that is settled. You will look a very sweet little trio, and if Nina is good, and runs up to her own Brenda now, and kisses her, she needn’t take the account-book to Castle Beverley. Just for one day, she may resign her office as chartered accountant to this *yere* company.”

Brenda made her joke with a merry laugh and showed all her pearly teeth.

“Come, Nina,” said Josie, who was in high good humour, “you must kiss Brenda; you were horribly rude to her.”

“Oh, I forgive her—poor little thing,” said Brenda. “Little girls don’t like the rod, do they? but sometimes they have to bear it, haven’t they? Now then, you little thing, cheer up, and make friends. I have found a delightful shop where we can have tea, bread and butter and shrimps, and afterwards we’ll sit on the beach—it’s great fun, sitting on the beach—and we’ll see nearly all the fashionable folks.”

The thought of shrimps and bread and butter for tea was too much for Nina’s greedy little soul. She did condescend to get off the hot bed and kiss Brenda, who for her part was quite delightful, for the time being. She even took the account-book and pencil, and said that they should not be seen again until the day after to-morrow. Then she washed Nina’s flushed face, and made her wear the objectionable pink muslin with the folds across the bottom in lieu of flounces, and that little straw hat, which cost exactly one-and-sixpence, including its trimming.

Afterwards, they all went down on the beach, and presently they had tea. Then, in good time, they came back to supper, and after that, the delightful period of the day began for Fanchon, and the trying one for her two sisters—for Fanchon was now regularly established as Brenda’s companion when she went out to enjoy herself after supper, and the two younger girls, notwithstanding all their tears and protestations, were ordered off to bed. It was odious to go to bed on these hot, long evenings, but Brenda was most specious in her arguments, and Mrs Dawson and Miss Price and Mrs Simpkins all agreed with the governess—that there was nothing for young folks like early bed. Mrs Simpkins even repeated that odious proverb for Nina’s benefit, “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” In short, Brenda had broken in her pupils to her own satisfaction; and when she had seen them into their “nighties”—as she called those garments,—she and Fanchon, dressed in their very best, went out on pleasure intent.

It was a pretty sight to see the elegant-looking young governess and her somewhat *gauche* pupil wander down to that part of the pier where the band played; and it was truly edifying to perceive how Fanchon anxiously copied Brenda on these occasions. She imitated her step, her walk, her hand-shake—which was of the truly fashionable kind, stiff, and rising high in the air. Fanchon’s heart beat with pleasure when she perceived how very much Brenda was admired, and, as Brenda could do anything with her pupil by means of flattery, the young lady was by no means unhappy about herself. On this special night—the night before the visit to Beverley Castle—Fanchon felt even more delighted than usual, for she was allowed, at the last moment, in the close little hall of the boarding-house, to slip the precious, the most precious bangle on her sunburnt wrist.

“I always said you should wear it,” said Brenda, “and you shall to-night.”

Fanchon fairly trembled with happiness.

“It feels delightful,” she said. “It’s like a tonic, which gives me tone. I don’t think I should be afraid of anything if I could always wear this.”

“Some day you shall, if you remain faithful to your own Brenda.”

“You know, Brenda, I would do anything for you.”

“Well, it seems like it at present,” said Brenda, “but of course I have to think of the past. You were not so absolutely perfect on a certain occasion not very long ago, were you, dearie?”

Fanchon coloured.

“Don’t let’s think of that now,” she said. “If ever any one was unjustly suspected, you were that person, Brenda. Oh, how Nina hates herself for what she did! But aren’t you rather over-punishing the poor little thing?”

“I shall cease to punish her in a few days, but she must learn a lesson. Now then—I should not be the least surprised if Harry Jordan was at the band to-night. You know we saw him to-day, but we couldn’t take much notice with the other girls about. I have begged of him never to speak to me when Josie and Nina are present, for I can’t tell what a child like Nina may be up to. But I rather fancy he’ll be here on the promenade this evening, and I asked him to bring a friend for you to talk to, Fanchon; you don’t mind, do you?”

“A friend!” cried Fanchon. “Oh—I hope you don’t mean a man! I’d be terrified out of my seven senses even to address a word to a man.”

“Dear Fanchon,” said Brenda, “you’ll soon get over that. Well, here we are—and I do declare if that isn’t Harry himself coming to meet us, and—yes—he’s brought a very nice youth with him. Now, Fanchon, you will have a pleasant time too. Not a word, *ever*, to your sisters, or to dearest papa!”

“Oh, trust me,” said Fanchon, holding her head high, and feeling that she must survive the dreadful ordeal of talking to a man, whatever her sensations.

Now Harry Jordan happened to be a sleek, fat youth of about twenty years of age. He was well off, in fact he was doing a thriving trade in the draper’s business, but in a distant town. Brenda had not the least idea what his business was. He told her vaguely that he was in business, and she pictured him to herself as a merchant prince, and who in all the world could be more honourable than one of the merchant princes of England? But, be that as it may, she enjoyed Harry Jordan’s admiration, and if he were to like her well enough to ask her to marry him, why—she would probably say yes, for it would be infinitely better than remaining as governess at thirty pounds a year to Mr Amberley’s little daughters. Now, Harry was a youth who enjoyed a flirtation as much as anybody, and as Brenda had hinted that they could not be perfectly free and happy if Fanchon was listening, he brought a friend of his along—a certain Joe Burbery—to engage the attentions of that young lady. Accordingly, the four met, and Joe Burbery, a most sickly youth of seventeen, was introduced to both ladies, and after Brenda had said one or two words to him, quite enough to turn his head, he was deputed to his rightful place by Fanchon’s side, who racked her brains in her vain endeavour to say a word to him at all, and would have figuratively stuck in the mud altogether, but for his loud exclamation of delight when he saw her bracelet.

“I *say*!” exclaimed the youth, “what an elegant article—is it real?”

“Real!” said Fanchon, facing him with her little eyes flashing. “It’s eighteen carat.”

“Oh, is it?” said Joe. “I see. I never touched eighteen carat in my life—more likely to be nine carat.”

He winked hard at Fanchon as he spoke. Fanchon, in her rage, took the bracelet off and asked him to examine the hall-mark under the next lamp-post, which he accordingly proceeded to do. He discovered that she was right and handed it back to her with great respect. “How did you come by it?” was his next enquiry. “It is a present—I mustn’t say how I came by it.”

“Eighteen carat gold,”—murmured Joe Burbery. “Eighteen carat, and a very large and specially fine turquoise. Why, there’s a thing advertised for exactly like that. I remember it quite well; I saw it in the *Standard* and the *Morning Post* and even in some of the local papers here—a bangle just like this which was lost—supposed to be lost in a railway carriage. How funny that you should have one which so exactly answers to the description!”

“It is, isn’t it?” said Fanchon, laughing with the utmost unsuspicion. “Well,” she continued, “I am glad mine isn’t lost; I am frightfully proud of it; I shall love it all my days; I don’t mean ever to part from it. Even if I get a very rich husband some day, and he gives me lots of jewellery, I will always keep my beautiful bangle. Brenda says that it is the sort you need never be ashamed of.”

“It is that,” admitted Joe. “So *she* admires it—*she* knows a good thing when she sees it, doesn’t she?”

“Oh, yes—she is very clever—”

“And a stunner herself, ain’t she now?” said Joe Burbery.

“I suppose so,” replied Fanchon, who did not feel interested in praises of Brenda from the first young man who had come into her life. He ought to be too much devoted to her and her most elegant bangle.

The walk came to an end presently. It was necessary in Mrs Dawson’s establishment for the young ladies to come in

not later than half-past ten, and at that hour the two girls appeared in the hall. Mrs Dawson herself was waiting for them. As she proceeded to lock and chain the front door, she also saw the flash of the bangle on Fanchon's wrist. She immediately exclaimed at its beauty, and asked to have a nearer view of it.

"Why, I say," she cried, "what a truly elegant thing! Does it belong to you, Miss Amberley?"

"Yes," replied Fanchon. "It was given to me by a great friend."

Here she looked meaningly at Brenda.

"Come up to bed, Fanchon, do!" said Brenda. "You look dead tired and won't appear at your best to-morrow at the Castle. Good-night, Mrs Dawson." Mrs Dawson said nothing further, but she thought for a minute or two and then went into her private sitting-room and opened a *Standard* of a few days old and read a certain advertisement in it without any comment. After a time, she put the *Standard* carefully away and went up to her own room, for she had doubtless earned her night's repose.

As they were going upstairs, Brenda said in a somewhat fretful voice:

"Fanchon—I do wish you would not let people think that *I* gave you that bangle."

"But why should you not let them think it?" asked the astonished girl.

"Well—of course people couldn't expect a governess like me to give you such really expensive things."

"Oh—but they don't know what a darling you are," said Fanchon, springing suddenly on Brenda with the sort of affection of a bear's cub, and crushing that young lady's immaculate evening toilet.

Now, Brenda was decidedly cross because Harry Jordan had not been as pointed as usual in his remarks, and she disliked—she could scarcely tell why—the expression in Mrs Dawson's eyes when they had rested on the bangle. She was, therefore, not at all prepared for Fanchon's rough caress, nor for Fanchon's next words.

"I do wonder if you would be such a duck of a thing as to let me wear the bangle at Castle Beverley to-morrow."

"Wear it there!" cried Brenda, real terror for a minute seizing her. "Of course not—could anything be more unsuitable! You must appear at Castle Beverley as the innocent little girl you are. You must not think of jewellery. You mustn't allude to it, nor to your evening walks, nor to anything we do when you and I are enjoying ourselves together. Come, Fanchon, give me the bangle; I allowed you to wear it to-night as a great treat; but I want to put it away."

Fanchon looked decidedly cross.

"I should *so* like to wear it to-morrow," she said, "and I can't make out why you won't let me. If it is my bangle, mayn't I wear it when I like?"

"But it *isn't* your bangle—at least at present, and it won't be yours ever if you make a fuss. Come, Fanchon, do you want to quarrel with me? and oh—I am so tired! My dear child, give it here—I will take it." Brenda snatched the bangle from her pupil's wrist. "It would be such a pity," she said, "if anything destroyed our fun—and any one could see with half an eye that Mr Burbery was greatly struck with you. Harry told me as much. Mr Burbery is going to be exceedingly rich some day; he also is in the mercantile world: there's no other world worth considering, I can tell you that, Fanchon."

"He knows a lot about bangles, anyhow," said Fanchon, "for he was greatly struck with mine; indeed, I was thankful he was, for I couldn't utter a word, and didn't know from Adam what to say until he began to talk of it. And he said—oh, Brenda! that there is one advertised for in all the papers just like mine. I told him I wasn't a bit surprised, for mine was so very beautiful."

Brenda's heart sank down to her very boots. Her rosy, radiant face turned white.

"There!" she exclaimed, "I see you are nothing whatever but a gossip. I don't know when I will be able to let you have the bangle again. But now let's come to bed, and let's tread softly—we can manage without a light of course; it wouldn't do to wake Josephine and Nina."

So the girls slipped into the darkened, hot bedroom and presently got into bed, Fanchon to sleep and dream of Joe Burbery and the lovely bangle, and the sad pity it was that she could not display its charms to-morrow—but Brenda to lie awake; fear—dull dreadful fear tapping at her heart.

Chapter Sixteen.

A Scrumptious Day.

Notwithstanding that fear, however, on the following morning the pretty governess looked gay enough. They were to have a delightful day; there was no real danger; no one could prove in all the world that the bangle was not her own, or at least, her pupil's. But she would not allow Fanchon to wear it again. She must not be seen in it, that was plain. As the horrid, odious thing was being advertised for, it was highly dangerous that Fanchon should wear it. Brenda could not enough regret her imprudence in having allowed her pupil to appear in it on the previous night. But how could she guess that that uninteresting youth, Joe Burbery, would have noticed it and seen the advertisement—the

advertisement! oh, how perfectly dreadful! Why did rich people bother when they lost such a simple thing as a little gold bangle with a blue stone in it? Why could not they allow poor folks to have their chances? And Joe Burbery had seen—had seen—this horrible advertisement! Well, of course that meant nothing at all. Brenda could not guess that a far worse enemy in the shape of Mrs Dawson had also observed it. All she could do at present was to lock the bangle carefully up in one of the drawers of the humble little chest of drawers which the four had to share between them in their horrible hot bedroom.

She whispered a word to Fanchon not to breathe the subject of the bangle at the Castle, promising her as a reward that it should be hers absolutely, all the sooner. She then proceeded to make a most careful toilet herself and to superintend those of her pupils. She was really anxious that the three little Amberleys should look their best on this occasion. So she took their red hair out of the tight plaits in which they generally wore it, and combed it out and caused it to ripple down their backs.

This delighted Fanchon, and also Josephine, but Nina was greatly bothered by the heat of her thick fleece of red hair and would have infinitely preferred its being plaited tightly and tied with the old brown ribbon which generally adorned it. Nevertheless, when Brenda assured her that she was most elegant and altogether superior to most girls in her appearance, she decided to endure the unwonted heat.

A carriage from the neighbouring livery stables was sent for, and the three drove off in state to Castle Beverley, just in time to arrive on the scene between twelve and one o'clock; and Mrs Dawson, Miss Price, Mrs Simpkins, and all the little Simpkinses saw them off and wished them well, and a happy day; and when the carriage had turned the corner, Mrs Dawson was congratulated by the other ladies on her distinguished visitors. Mrs Dawson, however, made few replies, for she was considerably occupied with the thought of that advertisement and what it meant, and how it was that a commonplace child like Fanchon Amberley should wear so handsome a bangle.

"For my poor husband was in the jewellery line when he lived," thought the widow to herself, "and I know the best gold and real good stones when I see them."

Mrs Dawson's feelings, however, have little to do with the really interesting events of this wonderful July day. The colour rose becomingly into Brenda's cheeks as she thought of all that lay before her, and when the hackney carriage drew up outside the Beverleys' house, she stepped lightly to the ground, and her pupils, with extreme awkwardness, followed her example. Josephine managed, in her exit from the carriage, to tear her delaine frock, which was decidedly annoying; but nothing else untoward occurred.

Honora was there and so was Penelope, and so were several other of the girls; and they all swept Brenda and her little charges under their wings. Honora saw that the torn flounce was immediately mended, and then they went into the cool shady grounds. The three little Amberleys were introduced to girls corresponding to themselves in age, and were led away to enjoy several games. Fanchon for a time tried to observe the grown-up manners which Brenda had endeavoured to instil. She could not forget, either, that on the previous night she had worn a real gold bangle, and talked to a real man—for seventeen years of age seemed very old and grown-up to her fourteen summers.

But Josie and Nina had no intention of doing anything but enjoy themselves. After the first few minutes of shyness, Nina complained bitterly of the heat of her hair and said she wished Brenda had not taken it out of its plaits.

"Why," asked little Nellie Hungerford—"don't you always wear it like that down your back!"

"Oh, never," answered Nina. "It's screwed up into tight, tight plaits, and tied with some sort of string at the end. That's how I like it," she answered. "I *am* so hot with it falling all over my neck and shoulders—I wish I could cut it off."

"Oh, no—it is so pretty," said Nellie. "I tell you what," she added, "I'll plait it for you, if you like."

"Will you!" answered Nina, "I wish you would."

"All right—I'll do it right away, this very minute. And, Pauline darling, you can run into the house for a piece of ribbon. What colour do you want, Nina?"

"Oh, anything will do," said Nina—"a bit of grass, anything."

"Well, I tell you what," said Nellie; "we are a good way from the house at present, and I have some string in my pocket, so we'll tie it with that, and afterwards you shall have a piece of ribbon before we go down to lunch."

So Nina's hot, red hair was very badly and unevenly plaited. It hung rather crooked, much more to the left shoulder than to the right, and the string was not becoming, but that did not matter at all to the emancipated little girl.

When Nellie had plaited Nina's hair, she suggested that she should perform the same office for the other two girls. Josie longed to accept, but did not dare. Fanchon answered, "No, thank you, I prefer my hair down until I can put it up properly. I long for the day when I can put my hair up. Don't you?" she added, looking round at the little group who were surveying her.

"Indeed, no," answered both the little Hungerfords. "We should hate to be grown up. We love being children, don't we, Pauline?"

"Yes, yes," said Pauline. It was just then that her beautiful little bangle with its ruby heart flashed in the sun. Fanchon noticed it; it was so very like her own—so like, but with a marked difference. She could not help saying:

"What a very pretty bangle you have got!"

“Yes—isn’t it?” said Pauline, but she spoke in a low voice, and pulled Fanchon a little aside. “Don’t speak of it, please,” she said. “I often feel that I oughtn’t to wear it.”

“Do you, indeed?” said Fanchon, “I can’t understand why. It looks most elegant, and it gives such tone, doesn’t it, now?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” said Pauline; “it is just a pretty little ornament. Mother gave it to me.”

“Well, I’m sure you ought to wear what your mother gave you. It must be so sweet to get presents of that kind; why don’t you like to?”

“I will tell you, if you’ll not say anything about it, and at the same time, when I tell you, I want you to promise me something.”

Fanchon coloured with delight. Pauline belonged to the county, and there was quite a subtle difference between her and Miss Fanchon Amberley, which that young lady herself appreciated, struggled against, and detested, all at the same time.

“Of course I won’t tell,” she said, “it is very nice of you to trust me. Have you a secret? It seems to me that most people have.”

“Oh dear, no; I haven’t any secret in all the world,” said Pauline. “I wouldn’t; it’d be too horrid.”

“Then why mustn’t I tell what you say?”

“Because it would hurt my darling Nellie?”

“Your sister?”

“Yes.”

“And why ever would it hurt her? Is she jealous because you have got something—something so very, very pretty, and so—so—‘chic’?”

“I hate that word,” said Pauline, restlessly. “Well, I’ll just tell you the reason. I tell you because perhaps you will beg your sisters not to notice my bangle—I would so much rather they didn’t. The reason is this. Darlingest mother went to Paris not long ago and bought a bangle for each of us, one with a red stone—this ruby you see—for me, and one with the most lovely blue turquoise for Nellie, because Nellie’s birthday is in December, and that is the month for turquoises, and people who are born in December have the right to wear turquoises. And what do you think? Darling Nellie’s bangle is lost. We can’t imagine what’s become of it?”

“Is it being advertised in the paper?” asked Fanchon, opening her eyes very wide.

“Yes, of course it is. Have you seen the advertisement?”

“No, I haven’t, but I—I met a ma— a person last night and he—the person, I mean—saw the advertisement and—and—told me. I am so sorry, I hope you will get it back.”

“No—I am afraid we never will. The advertisement has been out some days now, and there has been no answer.”

“Who do you think took it?” asked Fanchon.

“Oh, one of the railway officials—it’s awful to think that those men should be so dishonest, but we’re certain it must be one of them, or, of course it *might* be a passenger in the train. Fred knows all about it. Fred thinks it must have been a passenger, but mother thinks it was an official. Anyhow, that doesn’t greatly matter, does it? Some one is a thief, and darling Nellie is without her bangle. I would much rather not wear mine—I really would—but mother insists, and I *think* she will get another for Nellie some day—that is, if Nellie is brave and doesn’t mind too much. But the loss of it has quite told upon her, and she isn’t half as good as she used to be, that’s why I don’t want you to speak of it.”

“Oh, of course I won’t. I am immensely interested,” said Fanchon. “I do hope they’ll find it; I should think they’ll be sure to. What was it like, exactly? do you mind telling me?”

“Exactly like this; do you notice the beautiful carving all round the gold? and the gold is the best that can be procured, and the stone was exactly the size of my ruby. I am July, you know, so the ruby is my stone. Well, well—we had better not say any more about it now—”

“I have a bangle of my own,” suddenly said Fanchon.

“Have you?”

“Yes—but I mustn’t tell you about it. I ought not even to have mentioned that I have one. It was given to me by—by—a great friend. I prize it dearly. I longed and longed to wear it to-day, but I was not allowed.”

“Who wouldn’t let you wear it?” asked Pauline.

“My governess—Miss Carlton. She said that little girls didn’t wear jewellery. But you are younger than me, and you have your bangle on. I do *wish* Miss Carlton would have let me wear mine! It is—oh—I *should* like to describe it!”

Pauline looked at her attentively.

“Well,” she said, “why don’t you—that is, if you want to.”

She was not really interested in Fanchon’s bangle.

“I oughtn’t to have said anything, even that I possessed it, and you must promise that you won’t mention it. I had no right to let it out—no right at all; my—my friend would be so dreadfully angry—you will promise you won’t tell?”

“Of course I won’t tell.”

Pauline spoke in an offended, off-hand manner. She was not at all taken with Fanchon.

“Come,” she said, “I won’t tell about your bangle, and you will ask your sisters not to mention mine. Now we must join the others. They’re going to have a game I know, under the trees.”

Fanchon followed her companion. She felt a queer sense of excitement, but not the most remote suspicion of the real truth entered her mind.

Meanwhile Honora, who wished to do everything in her power to make her visitors happy, arranged that Brenda and Penelope should be left quite undisturbed together. Penelope was not too happy at this idea, but as she could not possibly make any excuse for avoiding her dear Brenda, she was obliged to submit to it.

“Why are we to be left all alone?” said Brenda, whose restless eyes had roved over the entire company, and had evidently thought Penelope the person least worth conversing with.

“It is Honora,” replied Penelope at once. “She thinks that, as we are sisters, we ought to be glad to have a little time together all by ourselves. After lunch at one—we can join the others if you wish it.”

“Of course I wish it,” said Brenda. “I have nothing special to say to you, Penelope; have you anything special to say to me?”

“No, nothing at all,” said Penelope, a lump coming into her throat.

“Well, shall we join the others, then! There are such a lot of them talking under that oak tree.”

“It might look a little queer,” said Penelope, “and lunch will be quite soon. Let’s walk about under these trees; we shall be quite in the shade.”

“Well—if we are to appear devoted sisters, let us play the part,” said Brenda, crossly. “After all,” she added, after a moment’s reflection, “I am glad to have a few words with you, Pennie, for I want you to help me all you possibly can.”

“I can’t do anything more, I really can’t,” said Penelope, her eyes growing dark with alarm. “I got you that twenty pounds, and I don’t think I shall ever be happy again!”

“Oh—what a little goose you are! How you harp upon that trifle!—and how far do you think twenty pounds will go in the case of a girl who wants every single thing that a girl ought to have? I thought this dress,”—Brenda looked at her spotted white muslin—“was really quite ‘chic’ until I saw Honora Beverley’s. I must say I don’t like Honora Beverley—of course you won’t whisper it, darling—but she always manages to put me in the shade. On the day of your fête when I wore my pale blue silk, her real Parisian lace made me look commonplace. And now, to-day, her white muslin must have cost pounds more than mine. It is disgusting to be trammelled like this, and I am sure I am fifty times prettier.”

“Don’t, Brenda!” said Penelope, suddenly. As she spoke, she laid her hand on her sister’s arm.

“What do you mean by ‘don’t’? Why do you look at me in that queer way?”

“Because I can’t bear you to talk like that—what’s the good of fighting and struggling for the impossible? You are not born in Honora’s rank of life, and you can never aim at dressing like her. You look very—yes, very—”

“You needn’t say it!” said Brenda, her eyes flashing with passion. “I know what you think of me—I saw it in your face when I came up. You are ashamed of me! It’s a nice thing for one sister to be ashamed of another, and I do my best—my very best—and you know what I wanted that money for—you know it quite well. I could cry, but it would spoil my eyes, and my eyes are my best point I mustn’t shed a tear, though tears are choking me, and I could—oh—I could sob—at your treating me like this, when you know, too—”

“What do I know, Brenda? Brenda, what have I done?”

“You show it all in your voice, and in your eyes, and in your manner—you’re bitterly ashamed of me!”

“I should be very simple in my dress, if I were in your place,” said Penelope, “that is all.”

“What can be simpler in all the world than sprigged white muslin with blue ribbons and a blue straw hat with blue bows to match? If I could think for ever, I could not imagine anything simpler.”

“But all the blue ribbons—there are such a lot of them, Brenda. With a white hat, it would have been sweet. But, never mind—of course you’re very pretty.”

“Thank you for nothing, my dear—I don’t owe my face to you, and I wouldn’t change it for yours, I can tell you.”

“But tell me what you mean, for indeed, indeed I would help you, in the right way, all I could.”

“I hate that solemn, sanctimonious manner in which you are getting to speak. You used to be such a nice, loving little thing, and for *you* to reproach me for asking you to struggle to get me a miserable twenty pounds—why, you know I told you that I hoped to be engaged soon. If that comes off—and I see every likelihood of it, for he is very *empressé*—I shall have as many jewels and dresses and furbelows as your precious Honora, and perhaps more. And I’ll be able to help you, so you’d better not cast me aside.”

“Am I casting you off, Brenda? This is only my second day at Castle Beverley, and you and your pupils are spending it here.”

“Yes, I know that, and I suppose I ought not to complain. But the fact is, it does make me cross to see the difference between this place and the horrid den in which I have to live at Marshlands-on-the-Sea. I shall get Harry—his name is Harry, but you mustn’t breathe it—to buy a castle like this for me to live in when I am married. He can well afford it, for he is a—”

“Is his name Harry?” asked Penelope, impressed by what seemed to her the romance of a real love story.

“Yes—I told you so.”

“And his surname?”

“I had better not breathe that yet. You mustn’t know him really until we are properly engaged. He is exceedingly good-looking, of the blond type. He is—oh—somebody who will probably be a baronet. They make very rich City magnates—I think they are called—baronets now, and I shall be Lady—oh, I mustn’t breathe the name. But listen; I want him to come to the point.”

“Why—hasn’t he asked you yet?” exclaimed Penelope.

“Hush, child! don’t talk so loud! What an indelicate way you have of approaching the subject; you take the bloom off it—you really do. But you know, notwithstanding his enormous wealth, he has lofty ideas, and would be greatly impressed if he thought I was thick with the people here; so I want you to have me asked very often. And there’s another thing; I should so like you to have us sent back in one of the carriages this evening.”

“Oh, Brenda! Didn’t you desire the carriage you came in to call for you?”

“Of course I didn’t—you horrid little thing! Do you suppose I can run to the expense? Really, Penelope, you are too trying. I didn’t desire the carriage to call—certainly not. If these grand people will see their humble visitors walking back to Marshlands in the heat of a summer’s evening, why, they must—that’s all. I should have thought that my sister could have managed differently.”

“I can’t—I can’t,” said Penelope. “I hate asking favours. They’re so—just more than—kind. Couldn’t we send a message to Marshlands? I am sure a servant will be going in after lunch and I—I—would pay—I’ve got a few shillings.”

But this idea did not at all suit Brenda.

“No,” she said stoutly. “Nothing will induce me to take your money. If we’re not driven in, in one of the Beverley carriages—we’ll walk—we’ll arrive dusty and worn out, and wretched at Mrs Dawson’s—that is our landlady’s odious name. But what I really desire is to have one of the Beverley carriages, and for—for my Harry to see me in it. I do think it would have a most excellent effect on him; he is so wonderfully impressed by real style—I never knew anything like it.”

“Well,” said Penelope, “I really don’t know how it is to be done. There’s the gong for lunch. Shall we go into the house!”

Neither girl looked too happy during this meal; but Brenda contrived to get herself placed at table as far as possible from Penelope and as near to Fred as she could. She joked and laughed with Fred Hungerford, and he thought her a very pretty girl indeed. After lunch, however, he and his brother were obliged to go to Marshlands to see some friends. He mentioned this fact with regret to Brenda, who had hoped that he was going to be her partner in a game of tennis.

“I can’t,” he said—“it is a long engagement, and I can’t break it. I should like to awfully; but of course you’ll come another day; I know my aunt will be delighted to ask you. We’re so glad to have your sister with us—we think she is such a very nice girl.”

“So she is—a sweet girl—a noble girl,” said Brenda. She looked thoughtfully round her: there was no one exactly in sight.

“I made such an idiotic mistake this morning,” she said. “I wonder—if you would help me—I scarcely know how to manage.”

“Why—what did you do? and what can I do for you! I am sure I shall be quite pleased.”

“I forgot to desire the cab from town to return for us. Would you—or could you—send a message to the livery stables to tell them to come here at—oh, I don’t know what hour we’re expected to leave.”

“Not until dark—I’m certain, and of course you must have one of the carriages here. Wait a minute, and I’ll speak to my uncle.”

Young Hungerford crossed the hall. He met the squire, and said a few words to him. The squire slightly raised his

brows.

“She ought not to have done it,” he said. “I don’t much admire that young lady; but of course, Fred, we’ll see her home—you just tell her so. And now get off, my dear lad, and enjoy yourself. The Calverts expect you and Jim quite early.”

“I’ll just mention it to Miss Carlton—it’ll relieve her, poor thing,” said the young fellow. “She only forgot, you know.”

“Not a bit of it,” muttered the squire.

But Fred did not hear this remark, and, going back to Brenda, he set her mind at rest on the subject of the carriage.

“It is all right,” he said. “And now I must be off, really. There is Pauline. Pauline, come along here. Will you take Miss Carlton out to the others?”

“Please, will you come?” said Pauline.

She did not look too pleased. Brenda was quick to recognise the fact, and, as the boys had all dispersed, she did not find the rest of the day so agreeable as she had hoped, although the girls did their very utmost for their visitors. The little Amberleys were really enjoying themselves. Even Fanchon forgot that she was anything but a small and ignorant girl. She shrieked with laughter when Josie did, and as to Nina, she romped round and round wildly with her red hair in its crooked plait and still tied at the end by the piece of string; for all the children had forgotten the piece of ribbon which was to have graced it at lunch. Brenda almost cried when she saw her pupil. Her first impulse was to call the child to her side, but she restrained herself. She was in too bad humour to care. Nothing that could be done would ever make the Amberleys look the least like the Hungerfords or the Beverleys, or the Beverleys’ friends. There was Mary L’Estrange, with her interesting face, and there was Cara Burt, who looked both haughty and distinguished. Even she herself was nobody in the midst of this group.

But the strange thing was that Penelope, whom no one took any trouble about, whose dress was of the very plainest imaginable, seemed quite at her ease and was perfectly friendly with all the other girls.

“But she’s such a plain little thing,” thought Brenda. “Of course she is wonderfully fair, but then she has no colour anywhere, nor any distinguished touches, and that white linen drew doesn’t suit her one bit. But all the same, she looks as I don’t look—I wish I could make it out—I hate being in this place, and yet, I must make myself agreeable, for I want them to ask me again and again.”

The long day came to an end, as the longest, brightest days will. There was early supper for the children, who did not partake of late dinner with their elders. This fact alone somewhat offended Brenda, who thought that there might have been an exception made in her favour; and after supper, when it was really cool and delightful, Honora came up to the young lady’s side and asked her what hour she would like the wagonette to come round.

“It is our small wagonette, but it’ll hold you four nicely,” she said. “Father tells me that you forgot to order your carriage to return, and of course we are delighted to send you back to Marshlands.”

“I should like your carriage at any time that suits yourself,” replied Brenda.

“Will eight o’clock do?” asked Honora.

Brenda made a careful calculation. Harry would probably be going on the Esplanade about eight or soon after. She was quite determined that the coachman should drive them round in that direction. She meant the coachman to draw up in order that she might speak to Harry. That, at least, she might achieve at the end of her long and unsatisfactory day.

So she said, in a meek voice, that she was very, very sorry to trouble the Beverleys, that it was very stupid of her to forget to order her own carriage to return, that her poor little head did often ache so badly with the care of her pupils—and so on, and so on, until Honora wondered when her regrets would end.

“It doesn’t matter at all,” she said, in her pleasant, well-bred voice; “we are delighted to send you back, of course, and I hope you have enjoyed your day.”

“Yes, thank you so much: your home is so delightful—so different from most places where I have the misfortune to live. And then to see my darling sister so perfectly happy—I am greatly obliged. I hope,” she added suddenly, “that you will permit Penelope to come to see us some day at Marshlands. We shan’t have much to offer her, but just a hearty welcome and the love of her sister.”

“You had best come out here again; it would be fifty times better,” said Honora. “However, you will let us know; and now I’ll just run and desire them to bring the wagonette round. Why, it’s five minutes to eight.”

Honora ran immediately out of the room and Penelope came in.

“Well, Pen—I’ve got my way. I managed the carriage, you see, although you, strange, callous little thing, would not ask for it for me. But I have a champion in that handsome Fred Hungerford, and I’ve been practically asked here again. But now, look here—you must help me whether you like it or not. Listen. I shall write to you in a day or two asking you to come to spend the day at Palliser Gardens, where we put up. You’ll just know what it is if you spend one day with us. You’ll know what it is to be stuffy and hot, and to have horrid food, and you’ll see our miserable attic bedroom where we sleep all four together. You dare not refuse: you wouldn’t be quite so mean as that; and after you’ve come to us, and have got back again, you’ve got to make the worst of it; and then I’ll ask you again, and when I ask you the second time, you’ve to see that we come here instead. Well, I think that is all. You know your

duty. Whether you are ashamed of me or not, I am your only sister. Oh, here come my little charges: what frights, to be sure! Nina, *do* put your hat on straight and let me take that string from your hair—you utterly ridiculous child!"

Brenda pulled Nina with great firmness towards her, unplaited the shaggy mane, and let it fall once more over the child's shoulders. Then the wagonette was heard approaching and Mrs Beverley said good-night to her visitors, and all the children of the Castle clustered around. Just at the last instant, Fanchon flew up to Pauline and whispered in her ear:

"I *should* like to describe my bangle to you, but I—I just—dare not. But thank you for having given us all such a scrumptious day!"

They got into the wagonette. The carriage rolled down the avenue and Brenda immediately enquired of Fanchon what secrets she had been pouring into little Miss Hungerford's ears.

"Oh, something that concerns—a—a friend of mine," said Fanchon, looking wicked and mysterious; and Brenda suddenly remembered the bangle and felt crosser than ever. But, after all, she had her consolation, for the band was playing its very best as they passed the Esplanade, and there was Harry standing talking and smoking with some other men. Brenda immediately pulled the check string and beckoned him. He came forward in delight and confusion.

"I shall be too tired to see you this evening, Mr Jordan," said Brenda. "Drive on please, coachman. We have been having a delightful day," she called out, as the man took her at her word, "at Castle Beverley."

"She *is* a stunner!" said Joe Burbery to his friend. "And what swells she knows! I say, old man, I have seldom seen such a ripping girl!"

Chapter Seventeen.

Gathering Clouds.

Mrs Dawson was seated with that copy of the *Standard* which contained the advertisement for the gold bangle open on her knee. She had read the advertisement not only once, but twice. There was a reward offered for the recovery of the trinket of no less than three guineas. That seemed a very large sum of money to honest Mrs Dawson. She thought how acceptable it would be, and wished that the lost trinket might come in her way.

While she was ruminating, without quite knowing whether she would take any active steps, Jane, one of the house servants, entered and said that a lady wanted to know if there was a vacant room in the house.

"Oh, tell her there isn't," said Mrs Dawson rather crossly. "There's nothing whatever except the back attic—the one just behind the large attic where Miss Carlton and the three Miss Amberleys sleep. We couldn't put any one there, it's so choky and hot these sultry days."

Jane departed, but presently returned with the information that the lady did not mind what the room was like in the least and would be very glad to see the back attic.

"I don't know that I want to let it," said Mrs Dawson. "We're chock full now and you and Mary Anne are worked off your legs."

"That we are, ma'am; but we don't mind if you should wish to fill the room," answered the good-natured girl. "It's the season, and every one should have their innings. She seems an easy-satisfied sort of body—a Frenchy, I should take it, from her style of talk."

Here there came a clear, piercing voice at the very door of Mrs Dawson's private sitting-room. This sitting-room was the smallest apartment imaginable. It faced west too, and was hot at the present moment with the afternoon sun.

"*Pardonnez—pardonnez*" said the voice; "I do so want that *appartement* that your *domestique* did mention. I mind not the heat—oh, not in the very least. I am from *la belle France*, where the days are hotter than your English days, and the sun more bright, and the world more gay."

Here Mademoiselle boldly entered the room and came up to Mrs Dawson.

"I am a poor Frenchwoman, out for a little recreation. My funds are of the most *petits*, and I am satisfied with the very least that can content any mortal. May I see the *appartement* so minute, and judge for myself if it will suffice?"

Mrs Dawson eyed the visitor with scant favour. She disliked foreigners with all an Englishwoman's prejudice, and wondered how Miss Price, and in particular Mrs Simpkins—who had the best rooms in the house, owing to the needs of her large family—would like to associate with the "Frenchy." She was, therefore, distinctly cold.

"I told my servant to tell you, Mademoiselle,"—Mrs Dawson's lips quivered over the name; she had not pronounced it for many a long day—"that my house was full."

"But not replete," said Mademoiselle with avidity. "She did let out, that faithful one, that there was one *appartement triste* in your beautiful villa. I feel that I should be at home here. It is wonderful when we feel that drawing of the heart towards certain of our fellow-creatures. I should love to be a member of your little family. I should make myself *très-agréable*: I should converse in the broken English which makes your folk laugh. We of the French tongue never laugh at your mistakes when you try to copy us. But I mind not that. I like you to laugh. May I see the chamber and decide for myself?"

“Well, if you are satisfied,” said Mrs Dawson, “I of course want to make as much money as I can. The room is at the very top of the house, and I have stowed away one or two boxes just under the roof. I hardly ever let it because it faces due west and the slates get so hot people complain that they can’t sleep in it of nights. It’s next door, also, to a large attic where three young ladies and their governess sleep. You mayn’t even find quiet in the little room.”

“I mind not,” said Mademoiselle, “I am accustomed to the vagaries of the youthful. I am indeed a teacher from that most distinguished school, Hazlitt Chase. My dear pupil, Penelope Carlton, and I, came to Marshlands two nights ago, she to visit my dear and most beloved pupil, Miss Honora Beverley, and I to search for a meagre *appartement* in the cheapest part of your gay and sparkling town. I find not what I want. I roam abroad to-day to seek for fresh quarters. I see your house so cool, so chaste, so—if I may use the word—refined. I say to myself—here is a home, here is a rest: I mind not the hot attic, for by day, at least, I shall be happy.”

“Oh, if you know Miss Beverley, that makes all the difference,” said Mrs Dawson. Her manner changed on the spot. “It is strange,” she continued, “that you should come from the school where Miss Beverley is being educated, and it is still stranger that the sister of one of your pupils should be at the present moment occupying the room next to the west attic. She is an exceedingly pretty young lady, and remarkably well off. She’s a governess to three little pupils, and they’re well supplied with not only the necessaries, but the luxuries of life. Even jewellery of the best sort isn’t denied them. But there—what a chatterbox I am! Jane, take this lady up to the western attic, and let her decide whether she will be satisfied to sleep there.” Jane and the voluble Mademoiselle climbed the weary stairs up to the attic which, at the present moment, must have registered ninety degrees in the shade. Even Mademoiselle gasped a trifle as she entered the tiny room; but she was too glad to be in the same house with Brenda Carlton not to put up with some personal discomforts. She, accordingly, decided to engage the apartment; told Jane that her luggage of the most modest would arrive within an hour and went down to interview Mrs Dawson.

“You do deprecate yourself, dear Madame,” she said. “Your room you so despise is to me a haven of rest. It is doubtless what might be called hot, but what of that? It belongs to a home, and I *shall*—I feel it—be happy under your roof.”

“My terms,” said Mrs Dawson, “are—”

Mademoiselle puckered her brows with anxiety. “You would not be hard on a poor French governess,” she said. “She would make herself *très-agréable*: she would tell stories of the most witty at your dinner table: she would make your visitors laugh and laugh again. She would instruct you in that cooking of *la belle France* which you English know so little about. She would offer herself to market for you in the land of these broiling July days. You will not be hard on one at once so poor and so useful.”

“I charge the ladies in the front attic a guinea a week each,” said Mrs Dawson.

“But that chamber is *magnifique*!” cried Mademoiselle. “I asked your most delightful Jane to show it to me, and I was struck by its size and the beautiful draught that blew through it. Indeed, it is cheap—very cheap—to live in such a room in the very height of the season for so small a sum. But the western attic, Madame, you will not charge the poor lonely foreigner as much for the western attic?”

After considerable chaffering on both sides, Mrs Dawson decided that she would give Mademoiselle the stifling western attic for eighteen and sixpence per week. This sum, of course, was to include her board. The French teacher considered matters carefully for a minute, then said with a smile:

“Ah, well! I must perforce agree. It is large—it is ruinous! But what shall I do? Where there is no choice, one must put up with the inevitable. I will do for you, Madame, all that I would have done had you taken this lonely one for twelve or fifteen shillings a week. I will still entertain your visitors, and teach you the recipes of my own land, and go errands for you and make myself, in truth, your valued friend.”

“Thank you, very much,” said Mrs Dawson, “but it isn’t my habit to trouble my visitors. Of course I always value a pleasant person at table, but otherwise I do my own housekeeping and I go my own messages.”

“Ah—Madame! you know me not yet. You will yet esteem my services. What a delicious cool *appartement* is your own!”

The room was steaming hot, and poor Mrs Dawson’s face testified to the fact. Mademoiselle, however, was in the best of humours. She hurried away to fetch her luggage—that small packet which she had carried in one hand while she dragged Pauline Hungerford along the platform with the other; and she had sat down and made herself quite one of the family by the time supper was announced.

During supper, she caused the entire company to convulse with laughter. She told one funny story after another, entreating them to laugh their hearts full and not to mind her poor English, which she would speak better if she knew how. In short, she was established as a most agreeable addition to Number 9, Palliser Gardens by the time the Beverleys’ wagonette drew up at the door with the three little Amberleys and Brenda Carlton ensconced within.

As the ladies had gone out to see Miss Carlton off, so did the ladies once more reassemble to witness Miss Carlton’s return. She was certain that she would feel to her dying day that she had achieved this, at least, with flying colours. The very look of the coachman on the box and of the footman as he flung open the door and helped the three awkward girls to descend, had such a paralysing effect upon the members of Mrs Dawson’s boarding-house, that they were all silent for a moment.

“That will do,” said Brenda, as she shook out her white skirts on the steps.

Then the coachman turned homewards, and after that, all tongues were loosened. Brenda was almost carried into the

house by the other boarders.

“Come straight into the drawing-room,” said Miss Price, “and tell us all about it. Oh, by the way, may I introduce you to a most charming addition to our circle, Mademoiselle d’Etienne. Mademoiselle arrived to-day. Mademoiselle, this is Miss Brenda Carlton.”

“I have the so great pleasure to know your sister,” said Mademoiselle, in a small, distinct voice, fixing her black eyes on Brenda’s face.

“You know Penelope?” cried Brenda.

“I have the so immense honour to educate that fascinating young lady in that elegant tongue of my beloved France. She is an obedient pupil and does to me credit.”

Brenda felt confused, interested, and on the whole pleased. They all entered the drawing-room, the three girls dead tired with their day and, consequently, very cross; Brenda was more or less cross also, but gratified to find there was such a fuss being made about her. Mademoiselle was cool, ugly, but nevertheless charming looking. What was there about her French dress and French manner which lifted her altogether into a different world from her dowdy English neighbours?

She was in black too—black from head to foot; but her black dress fitted her like a glove and her hair was most becomingly arranged. In short, she looked finished. Mrs Simpkins looked the reverse of finished, for she had just had a scuffle with her eldest baby in which the baby had been distinctly victorious; and Miss Price was hot and untidy, cross with the weather, but, nevertheless, ready to welcome the gossip that Brenda might treat them to.

“Oh, you poor childrens!” said Mademoiselle. “Miss Carlton will you not send these *petites* to their rest—they look so *fatiguées*. They want the repose so essential to the youth. What sweet childrens! I know I shall adore them all. But go, my little ones. Mademoiselle, you permit? Yes—go at once to your needed rest.”

“Yes, children; do run upstairs,” said Brenda. “Fanchon, you must go with the rest; we’re not going out this evening.”

“Oh, you’ve said that already!” remarked Fanchon in a rude voice, “and you’ve let the cat out of the bag too!” she continued, a venomous expression coming into her face; for the younger girls were not supposed to know anything of the existence of Harry Jordan.

“*What* cat out of *what* bag?” asked Mademoiselle. “I do so *adore* cats in bags—what mean you, *mon enfant*—your words thrill me—what cat out of what bag?”

“Hold your tongue, Fanchon, and go to bed!” said Brenda.

“Obey your governess, my dear,” said Mrs Simpkins. “You’re dead tired: creep upstairs, all three of you, and don’t, for the life of you, wake my Georgie, for he’s that fractious—enough to madden a body.”

The girls had to depart, and then Miss Price went up to Mrs Dawson and whispered something in her ear, the result of which was that Mrs Dawson went to the door and called Jane. She gave her hurried directions and, by-and-by, what should appear in the little drawing-room but delicious ices which had hastily been fetched from a neighbouring confectioner’s, and which Miss Price meant to pay for. Mademoiselle declared that she fairly gloated on the ices made in Angleterre; even Brenda was soothed by a really good strawberry ice, and, as there was one apiece, all the ladies congregated round and ate their dainties with deliberation.

“Now tell me about the Castle, do,” said Miss Price. “Is it as grand as they make out, or do they exaggerate?”

“Of course they exaggerate,” said Mrs Simpkins. “Folks of that kind always do.”

“But no,” cried Mademoiselle, “that is *imposseeble* to exaggerate the so great glories of Castle Beverley! It cannot be done. I have heard it described, and I was ravished with what I was told.”

“I have been there,” said Brenda. “I have spent the day; my sister is a special friend of Miss Beverley.”

“Not so very special,” whispered Mademoiselle, something like a little snake at that moment, in Brenda’s ear. Brenda turned and looked full at her. Their eyes met. It seemed at that instant that these two—the young girl and the experienced woman—crossed swords, and that Brenda got the worst of the encounter. There was a pause for a minute. Then she said, quietly:

“I don’t know with regard to the depth of the friendship, but I only know that my sweet sister Penelope is staying at the Castle, and that it is—oh, well—a very nice sort of place. I *could* imagine more beautiful places.”

“Windsor Castle, perhaps,” whispered Mademoiselle, at which remark Miss Price tittered audibly.

“But tell us, dear,” said Mrs Simpkins. “I have been thinking all day about it. I assure you that the thought of your return has kept me up although the heat is fearful, and Georgie is so cross, and little Peter cutting another tooth—oh dear! Of course I love my children, but sometimes they seem to do things just to spite you; for the doctor told me flat that Peter’s eye-teeth would not be due for another two months, and I made certain that we’d have our seaside holiday over before he began on it. The aggravation of eye-teeth is almost past bearing. I often say if a woman can live through the eye-teeth of her children, she’ll live through anything. But there—I am digressing. Go on, Miss Carlton, do.”

“What did you have to eat?” said Mrs Dawson. “Was there anything that specially took your fancy?”

“Ah, yes—tell us that!” cried Mademoiselle, “for I could copy it for these dear, most select and amiable ladies. I should so love to give them the benefit of my French experience.”

“I don’t know what we had to eat,” said Brenda. “Perhaps Nina could tell you to-morrow—she is our greedy one.”

“Poor little thing!” said Mrs Simpkins. “You’ve let her off her accounts, I see, and that’s a blessing. Now, Miss Carlton, you won’t take it amiss, but if you will allow a motherly body like myself to speak, you won’t be too harsh with that poor child. She’s a good child, and means well; and why in the name of goodness she should be pestered with that account-book and pencil at all hours of the day beats me.”

“Is this what would be so called a secret?” asked Mademoiselle, “for, if so, I will—to speak in the figurative way—stop up my ears.”

“Oh, no,” said Brenda, “it is nothing: I am teaching my youngest pupil a lesson, and these ladies—even dear Mrs Simpkins—fail to understand.”

“Ah—how I you do admire!” said Mademoiselle. “I also have my methods. We, dear Miss Carlton, will have much in common. We will talk together of our pupils and our wrongs.”

“For my part, I am getting sleepy,” said Miss Price, “and the conversation is not nearly so interesting as I hoped it would have been.”

She looked regretfully at the empty ice plates and thought of the bill she would have to pay at Jones’ on the morrow.

“But what did you suppose I would have to talk about?” asked Brenda, putting the last morsel of delicious strawberry ice into her mouth as she spoke.

“Oh, I’m sure I can’t tell. I had a sort of vision of a delightful time—I thought you’d begin at the very beginning, as they pay in the story books, and tell us of everything—what he said to her, you know, and what she said to him, and how they were all dressed—”

“And a good lot about the food,” interrupted Mrs Simpkins. “I’m great on nice food myself, and it’s delightful to think that a good-natured French body has come to stay here—”

“I will make you,” interrupted Mademoiselle, “of the *salade* the most enjoyable with a taste of mayonnaise, that cannot be compounded except by a person born in *la belle France*.”

“You mustn’t let Georgie see it, then,” said Mrs Simpkins, “for if he swallows even a morsel of anything Frenchy, he’ll be done for!”

“I could fancy it myself,” said Miss Price. “I am very much obliged indeed to Mademoiselle for thinking of making us a proper French salad.”

“And so am I, although you oughtn’t to trouble yourself,” said Mrs Dawson, who began to perceive that Mademoiselle might be exceedingly useful to her.

“Well, ladies,” said Brenda, rising, “I think I will go to bed. I am a little tired to-night, for we have been out so much. It was sweet of you, Miss Price, to give us those delicious ices. I have never enjoyed anything better. Doubtless, to-morrow, when I am refreshed, I shall have numerous little anecdotes to tell each of you in turn, but not before the children. It is so bad for children, too, to hear their friends gossiped about.”

“I agree with them sentiments,” said Mrs Simpkins. “I wouldn’t have Georgie listen to the tell-tales between me and Maria—that’s my maid at home—for all the world. Why, he’d have it out to his pa at his next meal for certain.”

“I’ll tell you each in confidence,” said Brenda, “and,” she added, “I daresay there’ll be plenty of fresh news for the future, for I expect to go constantly to Castle Beverley, and my sister is coming to spend the day with me soon.”

“Not Penelope, my most adored one!” cried Mademoiselle. “Do you say, dear Miss Carlton, that I am to see my sweetest pupil so soon?”

“I don’t know the exact day,” said Brenda, “but you will see her if you happen to stay here.”

“Stay here?” said Miss Price. “Of course we trust Mademoiselle will stay! It is delightful to have a real Frenchwoman in the house.”

“I said this place was home,” said Mademoiselle, raising her eyes ceilingward.

Brenda went up to her room. There she found all the girls already disposed of in their separate beds. To her relief, they were all, even Fanchon, sound asleep. She sat down for a short time by the open window and thought over matters. She did not altogether like the turn of events. Try as she would, she felt that she would never be anything but a nobody at Castle Beverley. More anxious than ever was she to secure Harry Jordan as her affianced husband. She had a shrewd guess as to his sort of character, and wondered what impression she would make on him when they met the following evening. Poor Brenda went to sleep fairly happy, on the whole, that night, little guessing what a very active disturber to her peace Mademoiselle d’Etienne would prove herself to be.

The next day broke, as usual, with cloudless splendour. The different ladies went out Brenda strolled abroad with her pupils. She found a shady place under a cliff, and sat there to rest, and looked around her.

Meanwhile, Mademoiselle devoted herself to Mrs Dawson. She insisted on going shopping, if not for her, yet with her. And Mademoiselle had an eye for a bargain which even that astute Englishwoman, Mrs Dawson, could never hope to possess. Why, those tomatoes which she purchased for almost nothing would never have been observed at all by the good lady, and then those little crabs which were going for a few pence (Mrs Dawson, as a rule, never purchased small crabs, but Mademoiselle begged of her, on this occasion, to do so) were soon disposed of in the worthy woman's basket; and lettuces, with other tempting fresh vegetables, were secured. Mademoiselle implored of Mrs Dawson to let her arrange the supper table that night.

"You have bought but little," she said; "nevertheless, it is enough. I will surprise the good, the dear ladies of your charming family with the French supper which I will prepare."

"But Mary Anne will never stand it," objected Mrs Dawson.

"Is she your cook?"

"Yes, and a very good one too—I pay her a lot of wages."

"Never mind: I will counsel her, and I will talk with her: I will get her to think that she herself has made the *soufflé* and the *omelette* and the tomato soup and the delectable preparation of crabs. She will know it not, except as her own handiwork, and I will be your cook."

"It is too much to expect of you," said Mrs Dawson, really won over by her paying guest's extraordinary kindness.

"Have I found a home—and am I ungrateful?" was Mademoiselle's response.

The result of this was that the two ladies came back the most excellent friends, and sat together until early dinner in that stifling little parlour. In that small room Mademoiselle got a good deal of information with regard to Brenda, whom she was interested in for more reasons than one, and also saw the advertisement for the lost bracelet with her own eyes. She read it over carefully and her black eyes glittered with excitement.

"It is a reward *magnifique*!" she said.

"I wish I could find it," said Mrs Dawson.

"If we were both to find it, *chère amie*," said the Frenchwoman, "we might divide the so great profits."

"But we never can," said Mrs Dawson. Then she added, after a minute's pause, "All the same, I'd like to say something."

"And what is that?" asked Mademoiselle.

"You mustn't breathe it, please. You're quite a stranger to me, but coming from Hazlitt Chase, and knowing Miss Beverley, I suppose you're to be trusted." Mademoiselle laid her hand dramatically on her very fat chest.

"I suppose so," she replied.

"And I must confide in some one, for the thing seems to burn a sort of hole in me."

"My good, dear, delightful friend," said the Frenchwoman, "don't let the secret prey on you in that fashion, for it will undermine your so precious health. Confide it to one who is ardent to help you, who has for you already the affection the most profound."

"It is nothing, of course," said Mrs Dawson, "and you will promise not to tell."

"I have promised."

Again the hand was laid over the region of the heart.

"Well, then,—it is just this. I know a good jewel when I see it, for my poor husband, the late Dawson, was in the jewellery line, and he taught me to know at a glance the difference between poor gold and good gold, and imitation stones and real ones; and if you will believe me, Mademoiselle d'Etienne, that little minx of a Fanchon Amberley came into the house the other evening with a bangle on her arm which for all the world might have been this,"—here she pointed to the *Standard*. "That bangle might have meant three guineas in my pocket, for it was eighteen carat gold as I am alive, and the turquoise in it was the most beautiful I ever saw."

Mademoiselle's dark face flushed and then paled; but she did not stir or show any other sign of special interest. After a minute, she said gently:

"There are so many bangles now-a-days, and they are all more or less alike."

"Of course Miss Fanchon—"

"Ridiculous to call an English girl by one of our names—"

"Had it of her own—she said a friend gave it to her, but she was very mysterious about it."

"I'd like to see it," said Mademoiselle.

"And so would I," said Mrs Dawson.

“I’d like to see it for a reason,” said Mademoiselle. “Mademoiselle d’Etienne, you don’t mean—”

“I don’t know that I mean anything, but if I saw it, I’d know once for all.”

“What would you know?”

“I tell you what, Mrs Dawson. I have examined the bracelet that little Pauline Hungerford—one of my adorable pupils—has worn, which she got on the day of the break-up. I took it in my hand, and she allowed me to examine it, and I know the other was exactly the same except for the difference in the stones. I should like to see the bracelet that the young lady who ought not to possess bangles, wears.”

“I don’t believe you will: there’s something about that governess which makes me think her a deep one—I can’t be certain, but I have my suspicions—and she seemed distressed, I don’t know why, when I noticed the bangle on Miss Fanchon’s arm.”

“Leave the matter to me,” said Mademoiselle. “This interests me; but I must be calm. You and I, dear Madame, are true friends, are we not?”

Chapter Eighteen.

The Locked Drawer.

Brenda was looking eagerly forward to the evening. A great deal would depend on the evening, for then she would see Harry Jordan again, and find out whether he was impressed or not. She had already perceived in that charming youth a passion for greatness—a snobbish devotion to the great ones of this world. She had wondered within herself why he cared so much for people with “handles,” as he expressed it, to their names. If he was as rich as he described himself, surely these things scarcely mattered to him.

Well, she at least was gently born, and had friends in the class which he so coveted to know. She was very, very pretty, and he had almost told her that he loved her.

“Fanchon,” said the governess to her eldest pupil that day, “we’ll go out by ourselves after supper to-night and walk on the promenade and listen to the band. The two younger children must go to bed immediately after supper; I must insist on that; Mrs Simpkins always helps me with regard to that. She thinks it is good for children to put them early to bed. But for that one redeeming trait in her character, I should detest the woman.”

“Oh, every one in the house is detestable!” said Fanchon, “except perhaps Mademoiselle.”

Brenda lowered her brows. The two younger girls were well on in front.

“I like Mademoiselle the least of all,” she said.

“Do you, Brenda?” cried Fanchon. “I wonder why.”

“I detest her,” said Brenda.

“Oh, but she’s so funny,” exclaimed Fanchon.

“Do you know,” said Brenda, “that she’s leaving Hazlitt Chase? Penelope mentioned the fact quite casually to me yesterday. She will not be there when darling Penelope returns. Perhaps if the ladies knew that little item of news, they wouldn’t be quite so agreeable to her. They think a great deal of the fact that she’s French teacher at the Chase.”

Fanchon yawned.

“I dare say,” she answered. “But after all, what does that matter? She’s rather a pleasant woman, I think, and she does talk such funny English; it’s as good as a play to hear her.”

“Well,” said Brenda, “we needn’t bother about her now. The great thing is for us to slip away after supper. Your friend will be there, of course, and you will talk to him.”

“You mean Mr Burbery,” said Fanchon, blushing. “Don’t colour up like that, dear—I wouldn’t if I were you. He can’t mean anything, of course.”

“Oh, of course not,” said Fanchon; but she coloured more vividly than ever, while a delicious thrill ran through her childish breast. “I wonder,” she said in a low tone, “if you will lend me the bangle again to-night.”

“No—I won’t, Fanchon.”

“But why not—why won’t you?”

“You are so dreadfully silly about it—you show it to people—oh, not by talking, but you shove out your hand and arm in such a hideously marked fashion. If you were modest, and like a girl accustomed to get jewellery, you would think nothing about it, and then no one would remark it. As it is, that precious Mr Burbery spoke of it. Then Mrs Dawson was attracted by it.”

“But where’s the good of wearing it, if no one is to see it?” queried the practical Fanchon.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Brenda, crossly; “but I can assure you it is exceedingly bad form to intrude it in the way you do. You look, when you have it on, as though you were all bangle—it’s absurd!”

“Well, all the same, I do wish you would let me put it on,” said Fanchon. “I can slip it up under my sleeve, then no one will notice and it does support me so tremendously when I am undergoing the ordeal of talking to a man.”

“No—you shan’t have it to-night,” said Brenda, and there was a finality in her tone which Fanchon recognised and did not attempt to dispute.

Supper that evening was of course extra delicious. The ladies were in raptures. The salad, made in the truly French style, was most appetising. There were certain most “chic” little sandwiches handed round to eat with it. Mademoiselle would not give away the secret of how those sandwiches were made. There were iced drinks to refresh the unfortunate inmates of Mrs Dawson’s fearfully hot dining-room. There was a fragrance about the supper which astonished and delighted these poor ladies. Mrs Simpkins very nearly shed tears.

“After the battle I’ve had all the afternoon with those dear, darling, dreadful children,” she said, “it’s fairly like heaven to come down here.”

Her raptures grew still greater as she partook of the savoury omelets, and by-and-by ate some of that *soufflé* which most certainly Mary Anne could never have compounded. But the crowning dish at that supper table was the preparation of crab to which Mademoiselle gave some long French, absolutely unpronounceable name, and which all the ladies consumed with immense satisfaction. Mrs Dawson was so struck with the success of her supper, and also with the pleasing knowledge that the ingredients which composed it had cost hardly anything, that she began to entertain serious thoughts of taking Mademoiselle into partnership on the spot. With such a woman to help her with her daily *ménage*, what might she not aspire to? Another house, a higher class of boarders, double and even treble profits. Then Mademoiselle was so nice to look at—although ugly, yes, quite ugly—and so charmingly witty, but so modest withal, never attempting to take the lead, listening deferentially even to the most minute details with regard to Georgie’s cold, and to Miss Price’s pain in her head, and yet guiding the conversation ever and always into channels which caused ripples of laughter and perfect good humour.

Brenda, who hitherto had been the centre of attraction, was cast completely into the shade. Brenda Carlton seldom looked prettier than she did that evening, but nobody noticed her fresh young face with its bright colour, nor the clear blue of her eyes, nor her charming figure, when ugly Mademoiselle was keeping the table in constant roars of laughter. Brenda felt that, if this sort of thing went on, her feeling towards the French governess would become dangerous.

The little Simpkinses were, of course, not allowed to sit up to supper, but the Amberleys always partook of that meal, and there was no one more greedy on the present occasion than Nina Amberley, who enjoyed the Frenchwoman’s cooking so intensely that she forgot to do anything but eat.

At last, however, the viands were disposed of. There was nothing for Jane to remove from the table but the empty plates and dishes. Mademoiselle felt that she was wearing a little secret crown—the crown of a great success, and Mrs Dawson rose majestically from the board.

“Children,” said Brenda, “you will at once go up to bed, it is exceedingly late.”

Josie looked cross, Nina defiant.

“Les *pauvres enfants*!” exclaimed Mademoiselle. “Why confine them to their *appartement* on this so hot evening! The air would refresh them—there is no need for this early retirement on these long summer days.”

“Your opinion, Mrs Simpkins, coincides with mine in that subject,” said Brenda, turning hastily to the fat mother of the babies.

“Oh, I know, my dear,” said Mrs Simpkins, “and I always do hold with my favourite proverb. But it is ’ot to-night, and I fairly gasp. I suppose an extra hour up would not be permitted, Miss Carlton?”

“No, no—you must go to bed immediately,” said Brenda, turning to her pupils. “Now off you go. Say good-night, Nina; say good-night, Josephine.”

Very sulkily did the girls obey. They were both of them consumed with rage when they reached their hot attic.

“I *hate* going to bed,” said Nina.

“It is abominable—it is cruel to send us!” cried Josie. “I want to know,” she added, “why Fanchon, who is only a year and six months older than me should go out and have no end of fun and why we should lie stewing in these hot beds!”

But though the little girls grumbled, they felt in their own minds that they were no match for Brenda; and when, a short time afterwards, that young lady came into the room, they were both in bed and were even pretending to be asleep. Brenda hastily put on her most becoming picture hat, glanced at the private drawer which contained the bracelet and her money, took Fanchon’s hat and gloves from the room, and, telling the others to go to sleep and be quick about it, took her departure. A few minutes later, she and Fanchon had stolen softly from the house, and ten minutes after that, there came a gentle tap at the door of the room where Nina and Josie were lying wide awake and conversing in low tones about their mutual grievances.

“Whoever is that?” said Joey, in a tone of some alarm. “Come in!” she called, and Mademoiselle entered.

“Oh, *pauvres petites*!” cried the French governess. “I venture to come to offer you my consolations. This ‘early to bed’ is what cannot be permitted. I also am an instructress of the young. I have had a long experience. Why should you not be out and enjoy the summer air?”

“Oh—but we dare not disobey Brenda!” exclaimed Nina.

“It is very kind of you, Mademoiselle, to come and see us,” said Josie; “but Brenda always sends us to bed when she and Fanchon go out for their fun.”

“Do they have great fun at this hour?” asked Mademoiselle.

“Oh, I don’t know—I expect so,” exclaimed Josie, and she giggled a little.

Mademoiselle uttered a sigh. She opened the window a little wider and left the door ajar.

“Now there is a consoling draught,” she said, “you will not suffer so much from the hot, hot air. Tell me your little stories, *petites*, so that I may you comfort while you lie awake.”

The children did not know at first what they had especially to tell to Mademoiselle; but that clever woman was not ten minutes in their society before she had obtained a vast lot of useful information from them—information which she meant to turn to good account. She had her way to make in the world, and could only make it by more or less dishonest means. In short, before she left the little girls on this occasion, she knew that little secret with regard to Nina’s account-book, and why Nina was learning this salutary lesson. She pretended to be rather shocked by the little girl’s disclosure.

“Oh, *mais fi donc! mon enfant*,” she exclaimed. “You to have had that very great mistrust! and your beautiful instructress has the anxiety written all over her face. She punishes you, and it is well. Doubtless it is also for that very reason that she confines you and your sister in this so *triste appartement*, while she and Fanchon go abroad in order to amuse themselves. But, my dear *petites*, I have not come to this house for nothing. I would aid you. I see not why you two poor little ones should not also have your so great pleasure. What would you say to coming out with me for a little pastime to-morrow evening?”

“We would love it beyond anything!” said Joey. “But,” said Nina, “we would not dare!”

“And why not, *petites*, if no person did know it?”

“Surely you could not manage that?”

“Ah—but yes; I think I know a way. I would you advise to slip into bed to-morrow evening with a willing grace; but put on your night things over your pretty day garments, so that you can slip them off quickly when I appear. I will then take you abroad for a delicious hour. We will go out and see the wonders of the night, and you will be in bed again and, *peut-être*, asleep, before Mademoiselle Brenda and Mademoiselle Fanchon appear.”

This sounded delicious, daring, extremely naughty, and altogether quite impossible to resist, to the little girls.

“You are quite a darling,” said Nina. “I only wish you were our governess instead of horrid Brenda!”

“Ah, *méchante*—but Brenda, whom you like not, is of the best. She has the principles the most high, and the desires the most perfect for your real advancement.”

“I don’t think so for a single minute,” said Nina.

“I’m certain that she’s a—”

“Oh—don’t say anything against her now!” said Josephine.

Mademoiselle looked anxiously round the room. “You will wear your very prettiest dresses when you come abroad with me to-morrow night,” she said. “I take you not to the promenade *ordinaire*, but to the most select one where the admission is one shilling each, and where we sit with the ladies and gentlemen of the highest quality. Have you no so-called trinkets or ornament! that you could wear?”

“Oh dear, no!” said Nina, “nothing of the sort!”

“But then you might borrow from your sister Function.”

Nina gave a childish laugh.

“Fanchon has only one little silver brooch, and the pin is broken. Poor Fanchon! what would she—”

“*Mais, ma chère*,” said Mademoiselle, as she laid a shapely French hand on the little girl’s arm, “I think you are under a misapprehension. Ask your sister to lend you her bangle.”

“Her bangle?” said Nina.

“Breathe it not, dear one, to your adorable governess, but ask your sister to lend it to you, and I will give you the most delightful surprise when you come out with me.”

“But she’s not got one!” said Josie. “I don’t know what you are dreaming about, Mademoiselle. Poor Fanchon—I only wish she had!”

“Well, dears, examine her belongings, and I think you will see that this clever mademoiselle is right, and that you, *mes enfants*, are wrong. Find it, and wear it, one or other of you, and you shall have a surprise which shall delight your young hearts. Now then, I must go. I am about to take a little walk abroad to refresh myself after the sultry airs of the house. *Bonsoir, mes enfants. Dormez bien*.”

Mademoiselle waved her hand to the children, and gently closed the door behind her. She left them both in a state of great excitement and wonder. What a fascinating woman she was! How delightfully she sympathised! and wouldn’t it be fun to go out with her on the following evening, to have a very superior treat to that one which Fanchon enjoyed and made such a fuss about? Oh, the mystery of the whole thing, and the spice of danger in it, and the awful dread of discovery, and the maddening joy of getting away without anybody knowing, and the charming surprise which would await them!

“But Mademoiselle must be mad on one point,” said Nina, “for she talks of Fanchon’s bangle. Fanchon hasn’t got a bangle.”

“There’s no saying what she has or hasn’t,” said Josie. “She’s so abominably mysterious lately; she’s so stuck up, and has such airs and graces, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if she had got Brenda to buy her one of those cheap shilling things you see in the shop windows.”

“Brenda never got me to put that expense down in the account-book,” said Nina.

“Oh, she wouldn’t!” exclaimed Josie. “She’s too sly.”

“It seems a great pity,” said Nina, after another restless twiddle in her little hot bed, “that we can’t find out.”

“We could look through the drawers, of course,” said Joey, “and discover for ourselves.”

“Brenda keeps the top drawer locked and has taken the key.” Nina gave a little jump. “I tell you what!” she said. “Why shouldn’t we try if the key of the wardrobe would open the top drawer of the chest of drawers? It looks exactly the same: I noticed that myself when first we came.”

“But there isn’t any key to the wardrobe!” exclaimed Joey.

“Oh—isn’t there? I know better. It was always lying on the floor, and I picked it up and put it behind that ornament on the mantelpiece so as to get it out of the way.”

“Well—we can look at once,” said Josie.

“What fun it will be if Fanchon really has a shilling bangle, and Brenda forgot to have it entered in the accounts!”

The two girls sprang out of bed. They were trembling with excitement. They longed beyond anything to discover if Mademoiselle was right.

“But if she has it,” suddenly exclaimed Nina, “she may be wearing it—it’s just the sort of thing she would do—she’d be so desperately proud of it!”

“Yes,” said Josie, “and by the evening light people would think it was real. Oh, I say, Nina, what fun—this key does open the drawers! Yes, and locks them too. I say now, shall we have a search?”

The girls ransacked the precious locked drawer, and of course, in less than a minute, came upon the gold bangle with the turquoise ornament. They brought it to the window and examined it carefully by the light of the moon. While Josie held it, Nina kept the little box, in which it was generally concealed, in her hand. She now read the writing on it.

“Why—it *is* Fanchon’s!” she cried, “here’s her name on the box saying that the bangle is hers. Oh, what a wicked, wicked Fanchon, not to tell us! Won’t we tease her about this!”

“No, we mustn’t,” said Josie. “But I tell you what we’ll do. We’ll just carefully—most carefully—put that key away, and then to-morrow night before we go out, we’ll unlock the drawer and take the bangle, and either you or I can wear it. What *awful* fun that’ll be! We’ll have our surprise too—how clever of Mademoiselle to know!”

“Perhaps after our delicious time out is over, and our surprise is come to an end, we may talk to Fanchon about her horrid meanness in keeping the bangle a secret.”

“Of course it isn’t real gold—it’s only one of those shilling things; but she might have told—that she might.”

“That she might,” exclaimed the other sister.

Then they put the bangle carefully back into its box, and readjusted the drawer so as not to allow suspicious eyes to guess that anything had been disarranged. They took the precious key which could unlock the drawer and display this marvellous fairyland of delight, and hid it under a portion of the carpet which went straight under the bed in which they slept.

“No one will find it here,” said Nina, “for this room is never cleaned. I asked Jane about it, and she said she never cleans the bedrooms except when new visitors come. We *shall* have fun to-morrow night—I can hardly sleep for thinking about it!”

Chapter Nineteen.

Brenda and Fanchon had by no means a very satisfactory evening out. Harry Jordan was not quite as *empressé* as usual; the fact being that he had not the most remote intention of ever asking Brenda to marry him, and was already turning his attentions to another young lady, much more in his rank of life.

Joe Burbery did not put in an appearance, and Harry, after walking up and down the Esplanade two or three times with Brenda and Fanchon, managed to make his escape to that new siren who was at present occupying his fickle affections.

Brenda's rage and disappointment scarcely knew any bounds; but she would not show her feelings for the world, and walked up and down with Fanchon until the usual hour for retiring.

"It's a great pity one of us had not the bangle on," said the eldest pupil, as she walked with her governess. "He would have been interested in that: every one is who sees it—it's so very lovely."

"Think of my giving it to you, Fanchon!" exclaimed Brenda. "Can you ever thank me enough?"

"I will thank you as long as I live when once you allow me to wear it properly," said Fanchon.

Brenda made no answer to this.

"We'll go out to-morrow evening, won't we?" asked the young pupil of the careful governess, "and you'll let me put it on them, won't you, darling Brenda—darling Brenda!"

"No—I won't—and that's flat!" exclaimed Brenda. "We shall have a very good time, though, to-morrow, Fanchon; for Harry says that he'll take us to a play down in the town. There's a very good travelling company now at Marshlands. You have never seen a play, have you?"

"Indeed, no—how perfectly delightful—I didn't know you had arranged that!"

"Yes, I have. I think really why he left us was to go at once and enquire for tickets."

"Oh, no—it wasn't," said Fanchon; "I saw him walking with a girl with black hair—a very tall, showy-looking girl—and they were laughing loudly."

Brenda bit her lips. She knew this fact quite well, but had trusted that Fanchon had not noticed it. When they returned to the house, the two younger girls were really sound asleep, and Brenda and her pupil got quietly into bed—Brenda to think of what means she could adopt to bring fickle Harry, that merchant prince, once again to her side; and Fanchon to wonder if by any possible plan she could induce Brenda to allow her to wear the bracelet on the following evening.

Meanwhile, plans were being made in another quarter which were likely to upset the most astute calculations on the part of Brenda and her eldest pupil. After breakfast, Mademoiselle managed to have a word alone with Nina Amberley. There and then, Nina told her that she had discovered how very wise Mademoiselle was—that Fanchon really had an ugly old cheap bangle, which she knew only cost a shilling, and that beyond doubt the said bangle would appear on Nina's wrist that very evening when Mademoiselle took Josie and herself for their surprise treat. Mademoiselle could have hugged Nina as she spoke. Little as she cared for the plain face of that extraordinary child, she thought that same face almost beautiful at that moment. But she had her work to do. She meant to be thoroughly sure of her facts; and, after parting from Nina and cautioning her not to reveal a word but to trust absolutely to the poor Frenchwoman for an evening of such intense fascination that she could never forget it as long as she lived, she hurried from the child's presence, went up to her room, and there she dressed herself in her very best.

Mademoiselle's best was plain, but it was eminently suitable. She ran downstairs, and entered Mrs Dawson's parlour.

"I should not be the least surprised," she said in a low voice, "if you and I, dear Madame, did obtain our little, our very little reward for the eighteen carat gold bangle with the beautiful turquoise stone in the clasp. But I tell you no more; only, Madame, you will miss me to-day at my mid-day meal; for I must repair to Castle Beverley in order to see my two beloved pupils—Miss Honora and Miss Penelope."

Of course Mrs Dawson was all curiosity, and of course Mademoiselle was all mystery. Nothing would induce the French governess to reveal so much as a pin's point of how she knew what she knew. In the end Mademoiselle departed, making first the necessary proviso that Mrs Dawson should not repeat to any of the ladies of the *pension* where the French governess had gone.

"For the sake of ourselves, it is best not to do so, I you do assure," said Mademoiselle, and then she started to walk to Castle Beverley.

Mademoiselle had by no means a good complexion; but then she never flushed, or looked the least hot; and when that long walk had come to an end, she had not a speck of dust on her neat black dress, for she had taken the precaution to bring with her a tiny clothes brush, with which she carefully removed what she had gathered from the dusty highroad; and her hair was as fresh as though she had just arranged it before the best looking-glass in the world. She drew on a pair of new gloves, which she did not wear while she was walking, and, with her dainty parasol unfurled, and her exquisite feet perfectly shod, she appeared quite a stylish-looking person when she enquired of the powdered footman if Miss Beverley was within.

Yes, Miss Beverley was within. Mademoiselle produced her neat card, and begged that it might be conveyed to the young lady. Meanwhile, the servant asked her into one of the sitting-rooms. There, a few minutes later, Honora joined her.

Honora was not glad to see her, but that did not greatly matter. She was hospitable to her finger-ends, and would not allow the tired governess to go away until she was thoroughly refreshed after her long walk.

“My pupil most dear!” said Mademoiselle, when Honora entered, “I could not rest so near your home the most beautiful without calling upon you. Alas, yes! I walked! But what of that, when I had such a joy at the end of the weary *kilometres*!”

“You must stay now you have come,” said Honora. “Will you come into the garden? It is beautifully cool under the cedar tree, and you will find most of us there. We shall have lunch by-and-by, and you will not return until the cool of the evening.”

Mademoiselle murmured her thanks, and was very glad to join the others under the cedar. She made the usual suitable remarks and, as there were several of her pupils present, they all gave her, more or less, a cordial welcome.

“I see you not again,” she said, tears springing to her eyes. “I return to my land, heart-rent for the absence of those I so fondly love.”

Little Pauline Hungerford had the warmest heart in the world. She did not like Mademoiselle at all when she was at school, but she was truly sorry for her now. She ran up to her and flung her arms round her neck.

“Why must you go?” she said. “Is Mrs Hazlitt angry with you?”

“I know not, *mon enfant*. I cannot imagine why I leave the good school where my loved pupils dwell, but the decree is gone forth, and I must submit. You will remember me when you conjugate your verbs, my little Pauline, will you not?”

As Mademoiselle spoke, she passed her arm round the child’s waist, and drew her close to her. The others were now talking to one another at a little distance.

“You have your pretty bangle on,” said the governess. “Have you heard of the recovery of its—so to speak—twin sister?”

“No, no,” said Pauline, “we don’t talk of it at all: it is quite lost, but Nellie is getting good; she doesn’t cry any more; she is resigned. Mother will get her one, I know, to replace the lost one, by-and-by.”

“Your sister Nellie is of the angel type; but perhaps—I say not anything to a certainty—she may be rewarded sooner than she thinks.”

“Why, Mademoiselle,” cried Pauline, opening her eyes in astonishment, “do you know anything?”

“Whisper it not, dear. I have at present nothing to say. At *present*—remember; but there may be news in the future. Allow me, my little one, to examine your bangle with its heart of the ruby—still more close than I have hitherto done.”

Pauline allowed the bangle to be removed from her wrist Mademoiselle noticed the curious and very beautiful engraving of the delicate gold.

“And the other was an exact counterpart, was it not?” she queried.

“Precisely the same,” said Pauline, “only that it held a turquoise and mine holds a ruby.”

Mademoiselle took a pencil from her pocket, and also a little notebook. She made some almost invisible tracings in the notebook and then returned the bangle to Pauline.

“You will speak no words,” she said, “but you will cultivate a *soupçon* of that precious hope which sustains the heart.”

Pauline promised, and went away, feeling more uncomfortable than glad. Mademoiselle spent the rest of her day in quite an agreeable manner. She had dropped all those traits which had made her disliked at Hazlitt Chase, and amused the young people by her witty talk and her gay demeanour. The strange children at Castle Beverley thought her altogether delightful: her pupils also considered her delightful, but with a reserve in their minds which confined that delight to holidays and differentiated it from the working days.

Mademoiselle could not be induced to stay to supper. No, she said she must hurry home. She was staying in the same house where that sweet girl, Brenda Carlton, with her dear little pupils, was living.

“I have a small attic there,” she said humbly. “The terms are moderate, and I am filled with sweet content. But I have promised to take some disconsolate little children for a treat to-night, and I would not disappoint them for the world.”

To Penelope, Mademoiselle hardly spoke; but before she went away, she went up to the young lady and uttered some extravagant words of praise of her sister.

“But you yourself are coming to see us. We look forward to your visit with the delight supreme,” said Mademoiselle.

“I am coming in to Marshlands to-morrow,” said Penelope. “Brenda has asked me to spend a part of the day there.”

Mademoiselle expressed her increased pleasure at this news, and presently took her departure, walking back again all the way to Marshlands. But on the middle of the dusty highroad she took out her notebook, and carefully

examined the little drawing she had made in it. She gave a low laugh of absolute contentment; and when she sat down to the supper table in the boarding-house, there was no person more cheerful or who looked more absolutely fresh than Mademoiselle.

Chapter Twenty.

An Exchange.

The two younger Amberleys were in a state of great agitation during supper. Had Brenda not been intensely preoccupied, she must have noticed this. Little Nina was too restless to eat with her usual appetite. She was silent too, watching Mademoiselle closely, but casting quick, furtive glances from time to time in Brenda's direction.

Brenda had achieved her object, and Harry Jordan was going to take her to the play. She had succeeded in this by writing him a note proposing the arrangement, and also offering to pay for his ticket. Harry Jordan had accepted, thinking all the time how infinitely he would prefer going to the play with Nettie Harris, the girl who was just at present engaging his wayward fancy. Brenda meant to make the most of this opportunity with regard to Harry. Fanchon must, of course, be her companion. Her hopes rose high as the hour approached.

"Girls," said Brenda, rising front the supper table, "go up immediately to your bedroom, it is very late."

"Late?" cried Mrs Simpkins, "it is more than half an hour earlier than usual. We have all of us been, so to speak, unconversational to-night. We have eaten our supper without repining. It was not quite as tasty a supper as what you gave us, dear Mademoiselle, but we have eaten it silently. I will go and sit on my balcony presently, in order to get cool. Peter's eye-tooth is certain to come through this evening, and I mustn't be far from the blessed darling. Ah, my dear young ladies! what troubles we take on ourselves when we put our heads under the matrimonial yoke. But there, children are blessings—"

"In disguise, perhaps," murmured Mademoiselle. Then Mrs Simpkins waddled off: Miss Price followed suit: one or two of the other ladies also left the room; and Brenda, driving her pupils before her as though they were a flock of sheep, left Mademoiselle and Mrs Dawson alone.

"The supper," said Mademoiselle, "it was *triste*. The good food it cost—oh, much, much! but it was not delectable. You needed me, *chère Madame*, to make the viands of the lightness and delicacy that would tempt the jaded appetite."

"But I can't have you always, Mademoiselle, so where's the use of trusting to you?" said Mrs Dawson, rather crossly.

"Ah, I knew not!" sighed Mademoiselle. "The future, it may declare itself in the direction least expected—I know not, but I think much."

Mrs Dawson longed to question her further. Was she alluding to the bangle! Why had she gone to Beverley Castle that day? Why was it not to be mentioned? She felt her heart burning with curiosity. But there was no amusement for her, poor woman, that hot evening. It was necessary for her to go back to her tiny parlour, and there sum up accounts and wonder how she could make two ends meet. For, to tell the truth, the boarders were hardly profitable, and it was very difficult for her to fulfil the requirements of her fairly large household.

While Mrs Dawson was thus employed, poring over her large account-book, spectacles on nose, and her face quite moist with the heat, Mademoiselle herself burst into the room.

"I make not the apology," she cried, "for the occasion is supreme. Behold!"—and she pushed the gold and turquoise bracelet into Mrs Dawson's hand.

"Why? what? where?" said Mrs Dawson.

"What—where?" echoed Mademoiselle. "Here—I say; here! I tell no more yet; but go not to bed this evening until I relate the whole of this *histoire*!"

She withdrew immediately, and Mrs Dawson sat back in her chair and said "Well!" to herself several times. The little girls were waiting for Mademoiselle in the passage. Nina, notwithstanding her ecstasy of spirit, was a little cross; for, whatever her faults, she was singularly downright and, up to the present, singularly honest.

"Why did you snatch Fanchon's bracelet from me?" she said, "and rush with it into Mrs Dawson's room? I don't want Mrs Dawson to know that I am wearing it—she'll tell, and then where will poor Josie and I be!"

"Tell!" echoed Mademoiselle. "She'll never tell—it makes not for her interest. *Restez tranquille, mon enfant, bien aimée*; you have notting to fear—put on your bangle so beautiful, and come with me to enjoy my surprise!"

Mademoiselle's surprise was of a complex nature. First of all, she took the little girls to a jeweller's shop, and there went to the unheard-of extravagance of purchasing for them a little brooch each. Of course these, little brooches were not real gold, but they were very pretty and were washed over with that precious metal. One was set with pearls, also of a dubious kind, and the other with a turquoise.

At the neck of Nina's little dress the turquoise brooch was now affixed, while Josie revelled in the one which held the pearls.

"These are for children the most to be adored," said Mademoiselle. "You will wear them whenever you go out with

me. Why should Fanchon have the bangle so pretty,—so 'chic'—oh, yes, it *is* very 'chic'—I can see that. Now, just, my dear ones, walk outside the shop for a leetle, a very *leetle* time, while I pay for the so great surprises I have got for you."

The girls obeyed. It seemed to them that each passer-by must notice their pretty brooches. They held their little heads high; they sniffed in the soft evening air. While they were absent, Mademoiselle eagerly asked to see a tray of bangles. She quickly discovered one somewhat like in design to the valuable bangle which was now reposing on Nina's wrist. She paid a trifling sum for it. It did not matter at all that it was made of the commonest gilt, and that the stone was no more a turquoise than she was herself; nor that the delicate engraving was lacking. Her object was to exchange the false bangle for the real one. This she trusted to be able to do. She was now in high spirits. She had parted with a few trifling shillings. Her discovery was imminent, and she felt that she would be well rewarded. Already she had compared the precious gold bangle with the delicate tracery in her notebook. Yes: without doubt it was the missing trinket. The reward, trivial in itself, must be shared with Mrs Dawson. But there were other issues at stake.

Mademoiselle took the little Amberleys to the choice seclusion of the best promenade. There she gave them ices and also a right good time. She was lavish with her money that evening. The children never laughed more in the whole course of their lives. They were quite free in their confidences to Mademoiselle, and implored her more than once to be their governess to supersede "dreadful Brenda," and to live in the house with dearest papa.

"He'd just adore you," said Nina, "I know he would."

"I'm not so sure," said Josie. "He adores Brenda; he says it's because she's so exceedingly fair and—and—pretty."

Mademoiselle asked a few questions with regard to the Reverend Josiah, and drew her own conclusions that it would not particularly suit her little game to be governess to the small Amberleys. She took them home in good time, and when they entered their bedroom, followed them into the seclusion of that apartment.

"You are so *fatiguées*," she said; "let me help you to undress. Nina, you little naughty one, where is the key of the drawer from where you purloined the bangle? I will it restore with my own hands."

Nina, now completely under Mademoiselle's influence, revealed the spot under the carpet where she had hidden the key. She produced it and Mademoiselle ran and opened the drawer, where she found the little box. She opened it.

"Give me the bangle, and we will pop it inside," she said.

Nina did so.

"I am glad to get rid of it," murmured the child. "It wasn't such great fun wearing it, after all."

"I have my hopes that some day this most precious little Nina will wear a bangle of gold real, with a turquoise the most valuable," said Mademoiselle.

As she spoke, she adroitly dropped the wrong bangle into the box and slipped the real one into her pocket. She then carefully locked the drawer and returned the key to its place of secrecy under the carpet.

"I am now *très-fatiguée*!" she cried. "*Bonsoir, mes enfants*."

She left the children. They had played their little part in the present mystery and were no longer of the slightest interest to her.

Brenda and Fanchon were having a fairly good time at the play, although Brenda could not get Harry Jordan to declare himself. She was rather tired now of this wayward youth. To have him desperately in love with her was one thing, but to have him negligent and with his silly thoughts elsewhere was quite another. She became downright cross when he proposed to introduce Miss Nettie Harris to her and her pupil.

"I am sorry, but I cannot permit it," she said.

"And why not?" asked Harry Jordan.

"My dear little pupils' father is most particular whit people they associate with," was her reply. "You must understand that in the professions there is a great deal of etiquette. Mercantile people are doubtless not aware of that; but it is my duty to protect my young pupils."

As Brenda spoke, she gave Fanchon a tender look, as though she were a sort of guardian angel, and Harry felt so properly snubbed that he very nearly returned to his first allegiance to Brenda. After all, she was a ripper. What style she had! Nettie Harris wasn't a patch upon her. But then Nettie Harris had a snug little fortune which might help them to marry and live in a very modest way; whereas Brenda had nothing at all but her beauty and her distinguished air and friends of the distinguished world. Yes, yes—it was a pity.

Brenda had Harry rather under her thumb for the rest of the evening and went home little guessing what had befallen her. There was a letter awaiting her on the hall table from Penelope, who announced her intention of coming to spend part of the next day with her. Brenda pretended to be pleased.

"We'll take her out and show her things," she said, turning to Fanchon.

"Perhaps you'll let me wear the bangle," said Fanchon.

"No, Fanchon; I may as well speak openly; I have made up my mind about it. I think it likely that I can arrange a little

picnic for you and me, and perhaps Mr Jordan, and perhaps Mr Burbery, some day before we leave; and on that occasion you shall wear the bangle, but not before. Now don't worry me, child. Let's get into bed, both of us, as quietly as we can; it's later than usual."

Fanchon was so sleepy that she was glad to comply; Brenda herself was also thoroughly weary, and dropped sound asleep the moment her head touched her pillow.

But downstairs in Mrs Dawson's little parlour, a deep consultation had taken place. The real bracelet, the lost bangle, lay absolutely on Mrs Dawson's lap. She was comparing the delicate engraving with the outline of a similar engraving in Mademoiselle's notebook.

"It is the same," said Mademoiselle. "There is no doubt that the thief—it is that wicked governess, Brenda Carlton. Now, Madame, you can, if you please, take this bangle to those persons who have put the announcement in the newspaper; or you can deliver it up to the police to-morrow morning, but if you are wise, you will do neither of these things."

"And what shall I do?" asked Mrs Dawson. "It's really a horrid thing to have happening in this house, but a guinea and a half each isn't to be despised, is it, Mademoiselle?"

"I do agree that the reward shall be divided," said Mademoiselle; "but, as a matter of fact, it was I who made the so great discovery."

"I know that," said Mrs Dawson; "but you wouldn't have thought of it if I had not put you on the scent."

"True, true," echoed Mademoiselle, "and I think not for a moment but of dividing the spoil. Nevertheless, Madame, there are greater things to be obtained than just a trumpery tree guineas, and my advice to you is: say notting—but leave the matter *absolument* in my hands. I have my own plans, and they will include you. Think what discovery would mean—just *now*, in the height of your so short season. It would mean that Mademoiselle Carlton and her three pupils left your establishment. It would not redound to your credit. Your other boarders might take the fright. They would say she harbour the thief, how can we by any possibility continue to reside under her roof?"

"You are right," said Mrs Dawson. "The whole thing is most disagreeable; I don't really know what to do."

"But I know how to assist you and myself to keep all *esclandres* at bay. We court it not, Madame. It is not good for your beautiful home; but the breath of scandal, Madame, it is—oh, *assurément*, of the most fatal!"

The consequence of this conversation was that Mademoiselle bound Mrs Dawson over to the most absolute secrecy, and thoroughly won over that good woman's confidence, who declared that she already felt she could not live without Mademoiselle, who went off to her own room with the bangle in her pocket.

Before she lay down to sleep that night she looked at it again. She kissed it; she gloated over it. Finally, she locked it up, not in the drawer which might be easily opened by another key, but in that small leather bag where she kept her treasured hoardings and which she hardly ever allowed out of her sight.

Mademoiselle slept soundly that night, and went downstairs the next morning in radiant spirits. Now the two little girl Amberleys had one frantic desire, and that was, to show Fanchon their brooches. If Fanchon had a shilling bangle, which she was so intensely proud of, why should not they be proud, more than proud of their half-crown brooches? Miss Carlton often left her pupils during the morning hours to their own devices. She had letters to write, and shopping to do, and she often liked to stroll on the promenade alone, hoping that Harry, the perverse, might meet her there.

This very morning the girls found themselves in their bedroom alone. Mademoiselle had, of course, to a certain extent, made them promise that they would not wear the brooches in public; but that was a very different matter from showing them to their own dear Fanchon, their sister.

"Although she is a stuck-up thing," said Nina, "she is our own flesh and flood, and we'll put her to shame by showing the darlings to her, although she has not trusted us."

Accordingly, as Nina sat on the edge of her bed that morning, she turned to Fanchon and said:

"When will that Penelope girl arrive?"

"I think she's coming to lunch," answered Fanchon. "I suppose she's a second Brenda," exclaimed Josie. "Oh, I don't think she's at all like her," answered Fanchon. "Besides, she is much, much younger."

"Brenda is very old indeed," said Nina. "She's twenty-one; I can hardly imagine anybody being quite as old as that—it must be such an awful weight of years on one's head."

"They say it isn't," replied Fanchon, who was becoming learned in all sorts of matters she had better have known nothing about. "Brenda says that you don't even begin to feel grown-up until you are past twenty."

"I suppose you have jolly times when you're out spreeing with her at night," said Josie.

"Wonderful," said Fanchon.

"You wouldn't tell us anything about it, would you?"

"No," said Fanchon, "it is quite, quite secret."

"*I* don't want to hear," said Nina. Then she added:

"Josie and I have a secret too—a beautiful, beautiful secret that *you* don't know anything about."

"A *secret*?" said Fanchon. "What nonsense!"

She thought of Joe Burbery, of the play, of the beautiful bangle. What silly children her little sisters were to talk of having secrets.

"Yes, we have!" reiterated Nina; "haven't we, Josie?"

"Wonderful!" said Josie, smacking her lips.

"Well, tell it, you little geese," said Fanchon, "and have done with it."

"Indeed we won't," said Nina, "not unless you tell us yours."

"But I haven't a secret," said Fanchon.

"You haven't? Oh, what awful lies you tell! I'd be ashamed if I were you!" said Nina.

"Well, well—if I have—I can't tell it," said Fanchon, colouring.

"You can't?" said Josephine—"not to your own, own sisters? You might—you know."

Fanchon would not for worlds betray Brenda, either as regarded her introduction of Joe Burbery, or the fact that she had taken her to a play—for dearest papa did not approve of plays. But she would have liked her sisters, in secret, in absolute secret, to behold the lovely bangle.

"I can't tell my secret," she said. "I have one—just a little one—but I can't, because I have promised."

"Then we can't tell you ours," said Nina. "And our secret is *lovely*! Isn't it, Joey?"

"Oh, ripping!" said Joey. "It's just golloptious! Won't you be jealous, though? You'll want to wear one of them sometimes."

"A thing to wear!" said Fanchon, colouring and trembling. "What sort of thing?"

"That's our secret."

Fanchon got up from the chair where she was seated and began, in a perfunctory way, to tidy the hopeless room.

"I suppose we had best go out," she said. "Brenda said we were to follow her to the sands. She says we're not to bathe this morning. Oh—and, Nina—you're to take your notebook and pencil—there are a lot of things to enter."

"I am going to lose that account-book," said Nina. "I won't be bothered any more—horrid Brenda!! I had dear Mademoiselle as my governess."

"Mademoiselle d'Etienne?" exclaimed Fanchon. "What do you know about her? Brenda says she's not a bit nice. Brenda distrusts her dreadfully."

"Well, and she doesn't like Brenda," exclaimed Nina. The moment she said this, Fanchon walked up to her young sister and said sternly:

"What have you seen of Mademoiselle? Out with it!"

"I won't tell!" said Nina. "You're not to question me—I won't tell! You have all your fun, and I don't mention it—I can if I like—I can write to dear papa and tell him, and he'll come over pretty quick—you had best not worry me."

"Never mind," said Fanchon, who didn't at all like this threat on Nina's part; more particularly as she knew that her little sister was quite capable of carrying it into effect. "Never mind," she repeated. "But you might as well tell me that little wonderful secret."

"I'll tell if you'll tell," said Josie. "There! that's fair."

"And *I'll* tell if you'll tell," exclaimed Nina.

Josephine walked softly up and down.

"Why shouldn't we three have secrets all to our three selves?" she said then.

"Oh, if I thought it wouldn't go to anybody else, of course I shouldn't mind," said Fanchon.

"Why should it go to anybody else? We just want you to know—it is so beautiful—so very beautiful!" said Nina. "We want you to know because you are our flesh and blood, but it's only fair you should give us something in exchange."

"Then I will—I *will* show it to you. I'll lock the door first. It is—it is—too beautiful—you'll envy me all the days of your lives, both of you. But you must never breathe it—you must go on your knees and solemnly declare that you won't let it out."

“All right,” said Nina, her little eyes dancing. “And you will go on *your* knees and promise that *you* won’t let out what we have got to say to you.”

“Silly children,” said Fanchon. “You can’t have much of a secret.”

“But we have—we have, we certainly have!” said Josie.

“Well then, here, let us clasp hands—that’ll do equally well,” said Fanchon. “We’ll never, any of us, tell to anybody, what is about to take place in this bedroom. I, Fanchon Amberley, promise.”

“And I, Josephine Amberley, promise,” cried Josephine.

“And I, Nina Amberley, promise,” exclaimed little Nina.

“Now, Nina, lock the door,” said Fanchon.

Nina did so.

“Who’ll show first?” she asked, her small face crimson.

“Oh—it’s something to show?” said Fanchon. “Well, you’ll show first, of course—you’re the youngest.”

“Must I?” said Nina. “You’re the eldest, you ought to begin.”

“Nothing of the sort: the greater comes last.”

“I wonder if it is greater!” said Nina.

“Never mind—you will soon see.”

“Well then—I’ll begin.”

Each sister possessed a little sacred drawer. The sisters’ drawers were destitute of keys, for Brenda had appropriated the key for her own far more valuable possessions. Nina’s was the bottom drawer. The chest was a rude, shaky concern, but the drawer itself was deep and held a good deal. She went on her knees now and pulled it open and pushed her little hand into the farthest back corner and took from within a tiny cardboard box. Her hand shook as she laid the box in her lap and looked up at Fanchon. Fanchon did not speak. She was waiting for Nina to proceed.

“Open it quickly, do!” said Fanchon, when the little girl still hesitated.

“It’ll surprise you,” said Nina. “You never could think that I would have such a thing: but it’s my very, very own. There, look!”

The box was pulled open, the cotton wool removed, the little gilt brooch with its false turquoise was held up for Fanchon’s inspection.

“It is mine!” said Nina—“*she* gave it to me!”

“Who in the world is *she*?” asked Fanchon, very much impressed by the brooch, and secretly coveting it. “That darling Mademoiselle. Oh, I can’t tell you anything more; but she was sorry for us little girls who go to bed every night in the hot, hot hours in this hot, hot room—and she gave me this! It’s a beautiful, beautiful trinket, isn’t it?”

“It is very pretty indeed,” said Fanchon.

“Well now—you see mine,” said Josie, and she produced the brooch which held the false pearls.

“There!”—she said—“Mademoiselle called them ‘very chic,’ and aren’t they—aren’t they lovely?”

“They are sweet!” said Fanchon. “How curious of her to give them to you. Of course they can’t be real.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t matter a bit,” said Nina—“they look like real, and that’s the main thing. Poor dear Mademoiselle couldn’t afford real jewellery.”

“You think they look real,” said Fanchon. “Wait till you see—”

She had discovered the spot where Brenda kept the real key of the chest of drawers. She had watched carefully, and had seen her put it inside a broken vase on the top shelf of the over-mantel that very morning.

“Girls,” she said, “I have something to show you. Both of you go and bury your heads against your counterpanes. Kneel down by your beds, and don’t look, to save your lives. Then *you* will see something!”

The girls flew to obey. In a minute Fanchon had opened the drawer and had taken out the little precious box.

“Now you may look, and you must be quick!” she said. “Oh dear—it is weak of me even to show it—but when you see it—”

She opened the precious box and lifted out the bangle, which she supposed to be the real one. There was the blue stone, there was the clasp, and there was the rim of gold, but—Fanchon felt all the colour rushing madly up to her face, and then leaving it. The bangle was *not* her bangle! Oh, yes—she had studied it once or twice; she had

observed its elegance, its dainty finish. “This—this—”

She looked wildly at her two sisters, who glanced at her in some wonder.

“Where *did* you get this?” said Nina, who felt that if she did not pretend now, all the rest of her life would be worthless to her.

“It was given to me by Brenda—oh, let me put it away—some one will come—I am frightened!”

“It’s only an old shilling thing, isn’t it?” said Josie. “Indeed not—it is real, as real can be.”

“Then why didn’t you show us the gold mark? there’s always a gold mark on real things—at least so Mademoiselle says.”

“I can—oh dear, oh dear—of course I can! but—you must come to the light.”

The three girls approached the window. They turned the bangle round and round. Alas! that curious little mark which Joe Burbery had detected under the lamp-post was nowhere to be found on the false bangle. Fanchon burst into a flood of tears.

“Some one has *stolen* the real bangle!—whatever am I to do?”

The two girls clustered round her. She cried a good deal; then carefully returned the bangle to its hidden place.

“I don’t know what is to be done!” she said. “It’s the most awful thing that ever happened! But *my* bangle that was eighteen carat gold—and there was the most lovely turquoise in it—is gone! Oh, what am I to do!”

Chapter Twenty One.

A Forlorn Hope.

The Amberleys were really fond of each other. They were worldly little creatures, and had never been trained in high principles of any sort; but they clung together, as motherless, defenceless creatures will in their hour of peril. They had a queer feeling now that they were in some sort of danger, and the younger ones sympathised enormously with Fanchon.

They did not of course dare to tell her what had happened on the previous night—how Nina had worn the bangle, the real eighteen carat gold bangle, the bangle with the turquoise of such size and elegance, of such an exquisite shade of colour, the bangle with that delicate tracery all over its gold rim. That bangle was so widely different from this, that there was no doubt whatever that the one had been substituted for the other. How had it been done? Mademoiselle? Oh, no, no. Nina looked at Josephine, and Josephine was afraid to meet Nina’s eyes, as the thoughts flashed quickly through each little brain.

Mademoiselle had helped them to undress. Mademoiselle had herself put the precious bangle away. But no—she was kind—more than kind. It could not be in the heart of such a woman to do anything so shabby. Nevertheless, the thought of Mademoiselle’s past treachery had come to both the little sisters, and they hated themselves for it, and feared to glance at each other, and above all things dreaded what Fanchon might be thinking about. Fanchon was, however, far too miserable to worry herself with regard to her little sisters’ thoughts.

“I cannot make it out,” she said. “Of course I shall have to speak to poor Brenda about it.”

“Perhaps Brenda did it herself,” said Nina then. It was an audacious and very wicked thought which had come to the little girl, but she was really intensely anxious to shield Mademoiselle at that moment. The words she uttered bore some fruit, for Fanchon considered them very carefully, and said aloud:

“If I really thought that—”

“What would you do if you did think that?” asked Josephine.

“I should go straight home to papa, and tell him everything—everything!” was Fanchon’s answer.

“But have you a great deal to tell him?”

“I have—oh, I have. I am a miserable girl! That odious—that vulgar—that detestable bangle—is *that* what I am to have in the end? She probably did *exchange* it for the real one, because she wanted to wear the real one herself. Oh, girls—how am I to endure it!”

“Buck up, whatever you do,” said Nina; “and remember your promise.”

“Oh—how I hate promises!” said Fanchon. “I want to fly at her now, horrid thing! and confront her with the truth.”

“Well, you can’t anyhow for the present, on account of your promise,” said Josie.

“Perhaps to-night you may talk to her, but certainly not before; and it’s time for us to be going down to the sands,” said Nina. “We’ll lose all our morning’s fun if we don’t. I want to get some of those buns from the little old woman who brings them round in her basket. I’ll get Brenda to buy them for us; I’m ever so hungry, and I’m not going to be afraid of Brenda to-day.”

“You’ll have to take your notebook,” said Fanchon; and then she gave a half-laugh.

“I!” exclaimed Nina. “Not I. I think the time of tyranny with Brenda is nearly over.”

The girls put on their hats, and strolled down to the beach. Brenda was there looking quite happy and unconcerned. She called Fanchon a little aside, and desired the younger girls to amuse themselves building castles in the sand.

“I am too old for that,” said Josephine.

“Not a bit,” exclaimed Brenda. “How ridiculous you are! you are nothing but a baby. Anyhow, please yourselves, both of you, for I want to talk to Fanchon.”

“It’s horrid, the way you make Fanchon grown-up, and make Nina and me quite little babies!” said Josie.

But Brenda looked troubled, and was quite indifferent to her small pupil’s remarks with regard to her conduct.

“I tell you what,” she said, after a pause. “You may do anything you like on the sands, only don’t wander too far.”

“There’s Betty with her tray of cakes!” exclaimed Nina. “May we have a bun each, Brenda? Will you give us money to buy a bun each?”

Curious to relate, Brenda complied. She gave Nina the necessary pence, and did not even refer to the obnoxious notebook. The moment the little girls were out of sight, she turned to her elder pupil.

“I met Harry to-day; he was quite contrite and nice. I feel almost certain he’ll ask me to marry him. I mean to go out without you this evening, and I mean to wear the bangle. I think the bangle will quite clinch matters. Harry thinks I am poor; but I don’t want him to do so. Why, what’s the matter, Fanchon?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Fanchon, making an effort to conceal her feelings.

“Have you a headache, dear? are you ill?”

“I am not ill,” said Fanchon, “but I have a little headache—the sun is very hot,” she added.

“I shall take Penelope with me this evening—that’s a good idea,” said Brenda, suddenly. “I shall keep her for the night; I mean to force her to stay. She’s got a very stylish air about her, which you, poor Fanchon, don’t possess, and what with Penelope and the bangle—”

“I thought you didn’t want Penelope to know about the bangle.”

“No more I do; but I shall manage just to let him see a gleam of it when she is not looking. You haven’t the least idea how to arrange these sort of things, my dear child; but doubtless some day you will. However, now it’s almost time to hurry home. My little Fanchon shall have that beautiful bangle all for herself when the holidays are over.”

Fanchon gave quite an audible sniff.

“What a very unpleasant noise you make, dear Fanchon.”

“Oh, I can’t help it,” replied Fanchon, and she stuck her head high in the air and looked so repellent that her governess wondered she had ever been bothered by her.

When the girls returned to the *pension*, they found Penelope awaiting them. She wore a brown holland frock, quite neat, but very plain. Her soft, very fair hair was arranged tidily round her head, also with the least attempt at display. She was a singularly unobtrusive-looking girl, and, beside Brenda, she was, as the ladies of the *pension* exclaimed, “nowhere.” They all criticised her, however, very deeply, for had she not come from Castle Beverley? By slow degrees, too, they began to discover virtues in her, the sort of virtues they could never aspire to. She was so gentle in conversation, and had such a low, sweet voice. She was very polite, also, and talked for a long time to Miss Price, seeming, by her manner, to enjoy this woman’s society. Mrs Simpkins looked her up and looked her down, and said to herself that although not pretty, she was “genteel,” and to be genteel, you had to possess something which money could not buy. The good woman made a further discovery—that pretty, showy Brenda was not genteel.

Mademoiselle was also reading Penelope from quite a new point of view. She had already gauged to a great extent her pupil’s character, and what she saw to-day gave her pleasure rather than otherwise. She talked to her, however, very little, and put herself completely into the shade.

When the meal was over, Brenda spoke to her sister.

“I want you to stay for the night,” she said. “We can send a telegram to the Castle to say that I have kept you. I want you to stay a bit, Pen; you will, won’t you?”

“I am afraid I can’t, for Honora wants me to go home.”

“You call Castle Beverley home?”

“Just for the present, and it is nice to feel that I can speak of it as such.”

The other ladies lingered round for a minute or so, but having no excuse to listen to Brenda and Penelope, they retired, leaving the two sisters and the three Misses Amberley alone.

“Children, you would like Pen to stay, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Fanchon.

“And you three could just for one night sleep all together.”

“It wouldn’t be at all comfortable,” said Nina, “but I suppose we could.”

“You would have to sleep at the foot, Nina,” said Fanchon.

“All right,” said Nina, “I’d like that best, for I could kick you both if you were troublesome.”

“I certainly can’t stay,” remarked Penelope. “I promised to come to you for part of a day, Brenda, and surely we can say all we want to say between now and nightfall.”

“You are horribly disobliging,” said Brenda.

“The carriage is coming for me too,” exclaimed Penelope; “I really must go back.”

“You could send a note quite well, that is, if you were really nice.”

The five girls had now gone upstairs, Mademoiselle had retired to her stifling attic. Mademoiselle was hiding her time. After a little further conversation Brenda perceived that it was quite useless to expect Penelope to remain for the night in the boarding-house, and accordingly, with extreme sulkiness, gave up her plan of impressing Harry with the elegant demeanour of her own sister that night. The next best thing, however, was to take Penelope for a walk. This she proceeded to do. The girls were told they might amuse themselves, which they did by locking themselves into their bedroom and examining the two brooches and the false bangle until they were fairly weary of the subject. Each girl in turn tried on the brooches, and each girl slipped the bangle on her wrist to shoot it off the next moment in horror and let it lie on the floor.

“Ugly, coarse, common thing!” said Fanchon. “Oh! when I remember my beauty, you can’t even imagine, girls, what it was like.”

“But it seems so ridiculous that Brenda could have given it to you,” said Nina. “Brenda might rise to a shilling thing, but as to the bangle you describe—”

“Well, well—I know nothing about it,” exclaimed Fanchon. “I only know that she did give it to me. Perhaps she inherited it from a relation. She wanted me to be friends with her, anyhow, and so she gave it to me, although I was not to have it for my absolute very, very own until we return to Harroway.”

“Well—I shouldn’t think you would much value *that* thing!” exclaimed Nina, kicking the false bangle across the room with her foot.

Josie ran and picked it up.

“It’s better than nothing,” she cried, “but of course it is common. Now of course our brooches—”

“Your brooches are common too,” said Fanchon.

“No, they’re not; they’re very, very elegant: any one would take them to be real.”

“What—without the hall-mark?” queried Fanchon.

“People as a rule don’t ask you to take your brooch off in order to see the hall-mark!” exclaimed Josie. “Don’t be silly, Fanchon, you can never wear that bangle, for it is too coarse for anything. But we can, and *will*—wear our brooches. We’ll wear them every Sunday regularly, when we get home. And won’t the children at Sunday school be impressed! I can fancy I see all their eyes resting on mine—I think mine with the pearls is even more elegant than Nina’s with the turquoise.”

“Well, come out now,” said Fanchon. “The whole thing is disgusting. Of course Brenda will discover very soon that the bangle is changed.”

“She won’t be surprised, because she did it herself,” said Nina.

“No—that she didn’t! I am certain sure she would not be quite so mean—I don’t believe it of her!” exclaimed Fanchon.

The three little Amberleys walked and talked alone that afternoon, while Brenda and Penelope sat on the quay. Brenda earnestly hoped that the redoubtable Harry would pass that way and see her with her elegant sister.

“I always did think you a fearfully plain girl, Penelope,” said her sister, “and of course you are plain. But you are mixing in such good society that it is beginning to affect you. You seem to me to have undergone a sort of transformation. You are—of course you’re quite ugly still; but you are—I can’t explain what it is—different from the rest of us.”

“You don’t look too happy, Brenda,” was Penelope’s next remark.

“I happy?” answered Brenda. “Oh—I’m well enough.”

“We’re very happy at the Castle,” continued Penelope. “Honora is so sweet, and all the other children are nice, and—I wish you could know something of our life—it is a little bit higher than this, somehow.”

Brenda kicked a pebble restlessly away with the toe of her smart shoe.

“I am not suited for that sort of life,” she said. “I don’t care for your Castle, but all the same, I think you may as well get me invited there again. What day can we come?”

“I don’t know: how can I get invitations for you?”

“You’ll be perfectly horrid if you don’t—it is your duty to give your own, own sister a good time.”

“Oh, Brenda—if only you’d be different!”

“I don’t want to be different, thank you; I enjoy myself, on the whole, very well.”

“You don’t look too happy: you seem sort of worried,” and Penelope gave a sigh and laid her hand on Brenda’s arm.

“When *he* proposes, it’ll be all right,” said Brenda. “It was on account of him that I wanted you to stay. I don’t want to be governess any more. I want to be married and to have my fun like other girls; and he is awfully rich—Oh—I do declare! Yes—it is—why, there is Mr Fred Hungerford and his brother!”

Brenda bridled, and drew herself up. Young Hungerford approached. He took off his hat to both the girls, and presently he and his brother and Brenda and Penelope were chatting in the most amicable way together.

While they were thus employed—Brenda’s face now radiant with smiles, her eyes bright with merriment, and even Penelope laughing and chatting in the most natural way in the world—who should pass by but Harry Jordan and his friend, Joe Burbery. Brenda felt that she would like to cut Harry Jordan at that moment. She contented herself, however, with the very stiffest inclination of her head. Fred followed her gaze, and favoured Joe with the slightest perceptible nod.

“How is it you know that bounder?” he said, turning to Brenda as he spoke.

Brenda coloured deeply.

“I just know him slightly,” she said, “do you?”

“Why, yes—of course. He is the son of a small draper in our town. I used to meet him when I was a schoolboy on my way to school every morning, and I think mother sometimes gets odds and ends at Jordan’s shop. They’re fifth-rate tradespeople, and I don’t believe their business is very extensive.”

Brenda felt a coldness stealing round her heart. Was this the explanation—the true explanation—with regard to her merchant prince? After a minute, during which she thought swiftly, she said:

“He has had the audacity to speak to me, but of course I shan’t notice him in future.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” said Fred. “He is in no sense of the word a gentleman. Well, I must be off. Penelope, I know the carriage is coming for you at seven o’clock. Will you be ready?”

“Yes, quite,” answered Penelope.

The two Hungerford boys disappeared, and the two Carlton girls sat side by side on the quay. People passed and repassed. Penelope was lost in thought. She was anxious about Brenda, and yet she did not know what to do for her sister. Brenda’s thoughts were so fast and furious that they need scarcely be described. After a minute, she said:

“On the whole, you are doing right to go back to your Castle and your grand friends this evening.”

“Of course I am doing right,” said Penelope.

“And,” continued Brenda, “I shan’t be married just at present. Perhaps I may some day, for I suppose I am pretty.”

“You are very, very pretty, Brenda.”

“Yes, but not with your style, and not like the sort of folks you know.”

“I only know them for a short time, Brenda. But I do hope that the time spent at Hazlitt Chase will enable me always to act as a lady; for we were born ladies, dear,” she added; and she touched Brenda on her arm.

Brenda clutched Penelope’s arm in response to this greeting with a feverish grip.

“You are all right,” she said; “but I can never go back.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am wrong from first to last. I made a great mistake and I can’t explain it. Let’s come home; don’t worry about me. You will do well in life.”

“I love you fifty thousand times better than I have loved you since we met on break-up day,” was Penelope’s response. “When you talk like this, you seem like the sister I lost long ago; but when you are stuck up and proud and

vainglorious, then my feelings for you alter. If you were in trouble, in real trouble, Brenda, and I could help you, I would."

"I daresay," said Brenda. Then she gave a light laugh. "But I am not in trouble," she said, "I'm as jolly as a sand-boy. Do let's come back; it is so silly to pay for our tea out-of-doors when Mademoiselle makes the very nicest little confections for us to partake of at home."

There was a particularly nice afternoon tea that day in Mrs Dawson's drawing-room. That drawing-room, until Mademoiselle had appeared on the scene, was truly a room to be avoided. The western sun used to flood it with its rays. The windows were seldom properly opened. What flowers there were lacked water and were half dead in their vases. The furniture wanted dusting and arranging. There were generally broken toys about, which the small Simpkinses used to leave behind them in their wake. As likely as not, when you sank into a chair, you found yourself annoyed by a baby's rattle or a very objectionable india-rubber doll. In short, the drawing-room was never esteemed by the boarders. But lo, and behold! Since Mademoiselle had come to Palliser Gardens, this same drawing-room was transformed. Were there not green Venetian blinds to the windows? What so easy as to pull them down? Why should not the drooping withered flowers be replaced by fresh ones which, by a judicious management of leaves and grasses, could give a cool and airy effect? Then Mademoiselle had a knack of squirting the Venetian blinds with cold water, which gave a delicious dampness and fragrance at the same time in the room. The curtains, too, were sometimes slightly drawn, and the furniture was all neatly arranged; and the tea—that was *recherché* itself—of such good flavour, so admirably made; then Mademoiselle was always fresh, always bright and presentable, standing by the little tea equipage, dispensing the very light, but really refreshing viands. Mademoiselle made one very gentle stipulation. It was this: that the small Simpkinses, the treasured babies of the establishment, should not come down to afternoon tea. Mrs Simpkins grumbled, but finally confessed that it was a comfort not to have Georgie tugging at her skirt, and Peter laying his hot head on her broad chest, and demanding "more, more," incessantly. In short, the little party became in the very best of humours at the meal that was hitherto such a signal failure in Mrs Dawson's drawing-room.

They all met on this special day, and Mademoiselle cast more than one earnest glance at her late pupil, Penelope Carlton, and then, with a smile hovering round her lips, poured tea into the delicate cups and handed it round, always with a smile and a gentle compliment to each lady boarder. Mrs Dawson was not present at this delightful little repast, for Mademoiselle insisted on the poor tired woman having a cup of tea all by herself and then lying down and sleeping until supper time.

Mrs Dawson was now completely in Mademoiselle's clever hands, and did precisely what that good woman wished. When the meal was over, the party again dispersed, but not before Mademoiselle had stolen up to Penelope's side and said quietly:

"*Mon enfant*, when do you take your departure?"

"I expect the wagonette at seven o'clock," replied Penelope.

"And you will be, *peut-être*, alone?"

"I think so."

"That is good," was Mademoiselle's reply. Then she vanished to suggest some particularly soothing application for Peter Simpkins' swollen gums.

At last the hour arrived when Penelope was to go. She bade her sister good-bye, and also the three little Amberleys, who regretted her departure without quite knowing why. A moment later, she had stepped into the wagonette and was being driven out of the town in the direction of Castle Beverley. The carriage had borne her just outside the suburbs, when a neat-looking black-robed figure appeared in the very middle of the King's highway, imperatively demanding that the coachman should stop his horses. This the man, in some surprise, did. Mademoiselle then approached Penelope's side.

"I have something to say to you, *chérie*," she remarked, "something of the greatest importance. May I accompany you in your drive?"

"But how will you get home?" asked Penelope, very much annoyed and not at all inclined to comply.

"The homeward way signifies not," responded Mademoiselle. "It is the drive with you, most dear one, and the so sacred confidences that form the essentials of this hour. You will not deny me, for in so doing, you will place yourself and your sister, the most adorable Brenda, in jeopardy."

"I suppose you have something unpleasant to say," said Penelope, "and if you have, the sooner you get it over, the better."

"Then you do permit me to enter into the carriage?"

"I cannot help myself, but I cannot take you further than to the gates of the Castle."

"That will be time sufficient. But we will desire—ah! I will myself speak to him."

Mademoiselle entered the wagonette, and stepping up to the coachman, asked him to drive slowly. She did this in such a very insinuating manner that he felt he could do all in the world to oblige her, and accordingly, let his horses drop into a walk. This the animals were not disinclined to do on so hot an evening.

"Now," said Penelope, absolutely unsuspicious, and turning her fair face—which owing to her recent happiness, was

really becoming quite good-looking—in the direction of her governess. “What have you to say, Mademoiselle?”

“This, *mon enfant*. I will tell it to you briefly. You know the story of the *petites* Hungerfords—the little one called Nellie, that *enfant* who suffered with a suffering so severe for the loss of her inestimable trinket—the bangle of the purest gold set with a turquoise most exquisite.”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Penelope, “I know all about it. The bangle was lost; has it been found?”

“Softly—*chérie*—I am coming to that. It was lost, was it not, on the very day of the *grande fête* at Hazlitt Chase?”

“Yes,” said Penelope, “I believe Mrs Hungerford thinks she lost it in the railway carriage in which she came to the Chase.”

“*Précisément*: you have the *histoire* in all its accuracy,” answered Mademoiselle. “And there was, *mon enfant*, was there not, an announcement of the loss in the newspapers, the so great newspapers of London, and the *petits journaux* of the smaller towns? And was there not that announcement with the reward attached even inserted, for the sake of the more safety, in the *journal* here—the *petit journal* of Marshlands-on-the-Sea?”

“I daresay you are right,” said Penelope, “but I really am not specially interested, nor have I followed what the Hungerfords have done.”

“Ah! *ma chère*—you say you are not interested once. But that will pass. That state of your mind will quickly arrive when you will be interested; for there is much to concern you in this matter. Behold, *mon enfant*, what I, your French governess, have discovered.”

Mademoiselle thrust her hand into her pocket, took out a soft, cambric handkerchief, unfolded it, and revealed the missing bangle.

“See!” she exclaimed. “Behold for yourself—I would convince myself, by visiting you at the beautiful Castle yesterday, and I remarked the bangle on the leetle Pauline’s slender wrist. I took a note of the fine engraving, and the pattern of it. Is not this *précisément* the same! See for yourself,” she added.

“Why, it is—it must be!” exclaimed Penelope. “So it is found out; did you discover it? How delighted Nellie will be! Are you coming up to the Castle to give it back to her to-night and to claim the reward? I know it will be given to you at once. Poor, dear little Nellie—she will be pleased!”

“Ah—*ma chère*!” said the French governess, “I act not so—I have not the heart so cruel!”

“But what do you mean?” asked Penelope, in great astonishment.

“You must listen to the *histoire* that I will tell to you. You must clearly first understand that this is the identical lost bangle—the bangle made of the eighteen carat gold—with the delicate engraving and the turquoise of the colour so pure, and of the form so rare and the size so marvellous. It is the identical one.”

“It certainly seems like it,” said Penelope.

“It *is* the same—rest assured.”

As Mademoiselle spoke, she folded up the bangle and transferred it to her pocket.

“I have something to say to you, *chère enfant*.”

“What do you mean? Why don’t you give me the bangle to take to little Nellie? I don’t understand you.”

“*Ayez patience*—you soon will be enlightened.” Mademoiselle bent close to Penelope; her voice dropped to a whisper. “They shall hear us not,” she said, “those men on the box. We can talk freely. Shall I tell you how I found it? I had my so true suspicions, and I followed them up. Now listen.”

With this preamble, Mademoiselle poured into poor Penelope’s ears the story of Fanchon and the marvellous bangle she wore, of Nina, and her walk abroad with Mademoiselle wearing the said bangle on her wrist, of Brenda’s reprehensible doings when she took Fanchon out night after night, and, lastly, of the very clever way in which she, Mademoiselle, had managed to substitute the worthless bangle for the real one.

“I talk not of myself as lofty in this matter,” was her final remark. “I am the poor governess who have here all to earn; but I am not so bad as that *méchante*—your sister. There is no doubt that on the day of the *grande fête* at Hazlitt Chase she found the bangle and that she would keep it for her own purposes. It was doubtless not lost in any railway carriage, nor was there any official or traveller to blame. She was the one who put that idea into your head, was she not?”

Penelope did not utter a word.

“There is circumstantial evidence the most grave against your sister,” said Mademoiselle, in conclusion, “but I try her not by my judgment; I have mercy upon her, and bring the case to you; I lay it at your feet. What will you do for the sister—the only sister that you possess? You most assuredly will not allow her to be put into prison. What will you do?”

Chapter Twenty Two.

Penelope was quite silent, not replying by a single word to Mademoiselle's insinuations until they reached the gates of Castle Beverley. Then she said in a quiet voice:

"You have told me something most terrible, and of course—I will do—I will do something—"

"But you will not expose that *pauvre* sister—you will not ruin her for all her life; and she so young and so fair."

"Please, Mademoiselle, promise me something," said Penelope. "You have told me the story, and I am obliged to you. I will let you know what I myself mean to do to-morrow morning."

"But that will be far too late, *mon enfant*; for remember, I have found the missing bangle, and for this so great discovery there is a reward offered, and that reward, although *très petite*, is nevertheless of consequence to one so poor as myself. I will claim that reward; but I want to claim more. If I keep this thing dark—quite dark, I claim a big reward."

"What?" asked Penelope.

Her whole tone changed. The coachman, by her directions, had drawn up at the avenue gates. Penelope and Mademoiselle had both alighted.

"Drive on," said Penelope to the man. "Say that I am following."

He obeyed. When the sound of the horses' hoofs had died away, Penelope turned again to Mademoiselle.

"You have told me the story," she said; "and now I want to know exactly what you do expect. You have, of course, told me the story not out of any kindness to me or to my sister. Please don't waste your breath denying this fact, Mademoiselle d'Etienne. You have told it, hoping to profit by it."

"*C'est vrai*," replied the Frenchwoman. "I am of the poor; I am of the needy; I have not the wherewithal to support the most precious life. I am dismissed from being your teacher through no fault of mine. The wide world—it lies around me; if I have not the money, I will starve!" She held up her right hand dramatically. "Does it seem to you of the reasonable that I should starve, Mademoiselle Penelope? Why should I not feather my own nest? I wish for the reward; but it matters not from whom it comes, if it come from you, your sister is saved; if it come from Mrs Hungerford, your sister and you—think of the position, *ma chère*—"

"I do think of it," said Penelope.

"You will consider it yet more deeply. I give you a little time. I tell you plainly that I want from you what you have already done for your sister. I know that you did collect from your school friends—those maidens so rich, so distinguished—the money—a great sum. I demand that you make a collection again, and that you give it to me. Twenty pound is my price; give me twenty sovereigns of the gold, and no person know notting of the lost bangle. If you will not—I tell what I know."

"Mademoiselle, do you think, do you really think that I am made like that?"

"I know not, *ma chère*; I only do know that once you got money from your school friends. You would like not that story to be known; but it can be spread all over the school at Hazlitt Chase, and Honora Beverley, that most saintly and esteemed young lady, can hear of it. She will not wish to have you any longer a visitor at her beautiful home; for she is of the lofty sort that stoop not to the ways of the wicked. Think what it will mean. And your sister—she will be, oh, in peril of grave imprisonment. Think of the public trial and the so great disgrace. Madame at the Chase will not receive you back; she would not dare to receive the sister of a thief! *Oh, fi donc*! She could not it endure. That is your position. But I deliver you therefrom if you once again exercise that spell which you possess; and get from your companions—it matters not which—the leetle, leetle sum of twenty pound. That is the whole, you understand."

"I understand," said Penelope. She spoke in a low voice; her face was white as death.

"I give you until the morning. You are puzzled, *pauvre petite*, and most truly do I you pity. But never mind; it is *nécessaire* that the poor governess be helped in her hour of so great need. To her it is equal about the disgrace to you and yours; in one way or the other she, the poor French Mademoiselle, makes a *grand coup* in this matter! And now, I wish you 'adieu' for the night. Communicate with me before twelve o'clock to-morrow. If at that hour I have no news from you, I take my own steps. *Adieu, chérie. Pauvre enfant, dormez tranquille*."

Mademoiselle turned away. She walked quickly down the dusty road. She had done her evil deed; she had exploded her bomb. Her wicked heart felt no sense of shame or sorrow for the innocent girl whom she had put in so cruel a position.

As to Penelope, she stayed for a little time just where Mademoiselle d'Etienne had left her. Then she turned and walked up the drive. She was stunned. She had not walked half-way up the avenue before a gay young voice sounded in her ears; and, of all people in the world, those she least wished to see at this juncture, rushed up to her and flung their arms round her neck and wrist.

"You have come back!" said Nellie Hungerford.

"We are *so* delighted!" said Pauline. "We have missed you just dreadfully. But we have had a good day. We went to the sands at Carlin Bay. Uncle Beverley took us, and we did enjoy ourselves! But still it isn't half so much fun when you're away. You're so splendid at telling stories, you know. But come along now; you're just in time for supper, and

after supper we mean to have a grand game at hide-and-seek before we all go to bed. Honora! Nora dear, here is Penelope—she is come back!"

Honora ran down the grassy sward to meet her friend.

"Why, surely," she said, "you didn't walk home?"

"No, no—I left the carriage at the gate."

"But why did you do that?"

"I thought I'd like to walk up the avenue."

"You look dead tired; is anything the matter?"

"I have a—a—headache," said Penelope, taking refuge in this time-honoured excuse for low spirits.

"Poor thing! I expect you found the sun very hot at Marshlands. As to Nellie and Pauline—I call them a pair of salamanders; they can stand any amount of heat. They would insist on father taking them to Carlin sands to-day; and they came back fresher than ever. The rest of us stayed more or less in the shade, for I never remember the sun being so hot."

"Come in, and have some supper, Pen; that'll do you good," said Pauline.

Penelope said she would. They had now reached the house. She ran up to her own room. She bathed her face, washed her hands, and brushed back her hair. She tried to believe that the dreadful thing that had happened in the wagonette was a dream, that there was no such horror surrounding her, lying in wait for her, clutching at her very vitals. She would keep up at any cost for the evening. When the night came, she would be alone. Then she could think.

Honora's voice was heard calling her. She ran downstairs. They all went into the long, cool supper-room. There a cold collation was spread on the table.

"I won't let you go to Marshlands again," said Nora, looking critically at Penelope. "You're just as white as a sheet. It is much too tiring this hot weather. Your sister must come to us instead."

Poor Penelope gave a little inward shiver. Pauline Hungerford nestled close to her.

"I've something to whisper to you," she said.

"Oh, no—not now," said Penelope.

"Yes, but I must. They don't mind what we do at supper—we're all quite free at supper. It is this: listen. Mother's coming here early to-morrow—think of that!—And I do believe she is bringing a bangle, the same as mine, for Nellie! She didn't *say* so in so many words, but I think she is. Then we'll be perfectly happy! Aren't you glad? I know I am. I've never half enjoyed my darling bangle at the thought of Nellie's sorrow. But Nellie has been very good lately, and hasn't talked about it a bit, or even once asked to look at mine. She wouldn't do that at first; she used to shut her eyes whenever she found herself forced to see it, just as though it gave her the greatest pain. I hate—and *hate* wearing it. Mother said I must, for it would be so bad for Nellie if she didn't bear a thing of this sort well. But now, it's all right, and darling Nellie will be as happy as a sand-boy. Oh, I *am* delighted!"

"Paulie, you mustn't whisper any more," said Fred Hungerford at that moment. "Hullo, Pen!" he added, "I am glad to see you back. Did you and your sister stay much longer on the quay? and did you meet that low-down fellow, Jordan, again? I can't imagine how your pretty sister got to know him."

"We didn't meet him any more," said Penelope, "and we went back to the *pension* soon after."

Supper came to an end. Pauline asked wildly, her bright eyes gleaming, when the grand game of hide-and-seek in the moonlit garden was to begin.

Here Penelope's fortitude failed her.

"I have had a tiring day," she said. "Do you mind, Nora, if I go to my room?"

"Is your head aching badly?" asked Honora.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is."

"Then of course you must go. And, children, we won't shout too loudly under Pen's window. Good-night, dear. Would you like me to come and see you before I go to bed myself?"

"Oh, no, please; not to-night, Nora."

"Very well—good-night. You really don't look at all well."

Penelope felt a brief sense of relief when she was all alone in her room. She took off her dress and put on a light dressing-gown. Then she flung the window wide open and sat down by it, resting her elbow on the deep window ledge. Her pale, despairing face gazed out into the night. How happy she had been at Castle Beverley! What a joyful, glad, delightful sort of place it was! How merry the voices of the children sounded! She could hear shrieks of mirth in

the distance. Oh, yes; Castle Beverley was a delightful home. She knew quite well why. It seemed to her that night that the whole secret of its gladness, of its goodness, of its beauty, was revealed. Castle Beverley was delightful, not because its owner was a rich man and well born; not because the children who came there were ladies and gentlemen by birth; but simply because the laws that governed that household were the laws of truth and love and unselfishness and righteousness. It was impossible to be mean in that home, for here the highest things were practised more than preached. There were no ostensible lessons in religion, but the religious life was led here, by Honora, by all the children, and, most of all, by the father and mother.

“That accounts for it,” thought Penelope. “It is because they are so good without being priggishly good, that I have been so happy. They always think nice thoughts of every one; and they are unselfish, and each gives up to the other. I don’t belong to them—I belong to Brenda. Brenda and I have the same mother, and the same father. We are two sisters. Brenda has fallen very low indeed, and I suppose I shall fall too; for how can I endure, even for a moment, what Mademoiselle contemplates doing—what Mademoiselle will do? It will mean Brenda’s ruin, Brenda’s public disgrace, and my disgrace! Oh, to think that I should be living here, and that the children—Nellie and Pauline—should love me, and confide in me, and all the time my sister—mine! has stolen Nellie’s bangle! Oh, Brenda, Brenda!”

Poor Penelope did not cry: she was past tears. She sat and gazed out into the night. Her perplexities were extreme; she could not rest. What was she to do? Mademoiselle had put her, indeed, into a cleft stick; whichever way she turned there seemed to be nothing but despair.

“I was so happy; but that doesn’t matter,” she thought. “The thing now to do is to know how to save Brenda. Can I save her by—by—trying to get money for her? But then I couldn’t get money. Oh, yes, I could, though—or at least perhaps I could, I don’t know. I wouldn’t ask the girls again for all the world—but there’s the squire; he might—might lend it to me. I’d have to tell him a lot of lies—and I shouldn’t like that. I must sink down to Brenda’s level in order to save her! Oh, Brenda, I can’t, I just can’t! Brenda, why did you do it? And I had got that twenty pounds for you. Why *did* you steal the bangle and put every one on the wrong scent and get us into the power of that terrible, unscrupulous Mademoiselle! She’ll do what she said she would—there’s no sort of hope from her. Oh, what am I—what am I to do!”

“Do right,” whispered a voice in her ear. This voice spoke light and clear from the conscience of Penelope Carlton, and it was so startling in its tone that it seemed to her that some one spoke to her. She started and looked out, gazing to right and left. As she did this, some one who was walking below, saw her. That some one was Honora. She observed the white, very white face of the girl and noticed its agony. All of a sudden, Honora came to a resolve.

“There is something wrong,” she thought to herself. “It’s not an ordinary headache. I don’t like that sister of hers a bit—we none of us do. She has done something to make poor little Pen unhappy. I just think that I’ll force myself on her this very night. She is too miserable to be left alone; of that I am sure.”

Mary L’Estrange and Cara Burt, walking arm in arm, came now into view.

“What is the matter, Honora?” said Mary.

“Why do you ask?” questioned Nora.

Mary gave a laugh.

“You look something like what you did that evening when you refused to take the part of Helen of Troy.”

“Oh, we needn’t bother about that now,” said Honora, a slight tone of vexation in her voice. Then she added, suddenly: “I am not quite happy about Pen; I don’t think she is well. I am going to her.”

“But she has only a headache,” said Cara, “and no wonder, out all this hot day in the sun.”

“I feel somehow that it’s more than a headache,” said Honora. “I saw her just now looking out of her window, and somehow, I feel she may want me: in any case, I am going to her. Will you, Cara, and you, Mary, just lead the games, and don’t let the children stay out very much longer; it’s time for the young ones, at least, to go to bed.”

Cara and Mary promised, and immediately turned away.

“I,” said Cara, addressing her companion, “also thought there was something queer about Penelope to-night. It is odd that Honora should have worn the expression she did when she refused to act as Helen of Troy.”

“And another thing is also odd.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cara.

“Why, at supper to-night, it seemed to me that Penelope looked as she did when she made that extraordinary request of us, asking us to give her five pounds apiece for her to take the part.”

“I didn’t notice that expression,” exclaimed Mary. “But it was very queer of her to want the money. I didn’t like her a bit then, did you, Cara?”

“Of course not,” said Cara. “I despised her utterly.”

“So did I, until she acted Helen, and then I could not help admiring her—she was quite, quite splendid.”

“And since she has come here,” continued Cara, “she has been very, very nice. Honora is wonderfully taken with her. Honora told me to-day that she loves her dearly and means to help her after she has left school. Honora says she’s

such a lady, and so different from her elder sister."

"Oh, *she's* quite an impossible person," said Mary. "But here come some of the stragglers. Now we must resume our play. Hullo! Nellie; is it my turn to be blindfolded?"

The elder girls, the boys, and the little girls continued their play, Honora ran up to Penelope's room and tapped at the door. Penelope started, and at first did not reply. But the tap was repeated, and she was forced to say, "Who's there?"

"It is I—Honora," called a voice.

"Oh, Nora—I am just going to bed," answered Penelope.

"No, you're not, dear. Let me in, please."

There was another moment of hesitation. Then the door was unlocked, and Honora entered. The room was full of moonlight, for Penelope had not lighted any candle.

"What is it, Nora?" she said.

"I thought I'd come and sit with you for a little, for—you naughty thing—you've not gone to bed; I happened to see you from the garden below. What is the matter, Pen?"

"I want to be alone to-night so very badly," said Penelope.

"You're very unhappy, Pen—I want to know what is the matter."

"I am unhappy—but I can't tell you, Honora."

"What is the good of a friend if you can't confide in her?" said Honora.

"If," said Penelope, speaking very slowly, "I do what I ought to do, you will never be my friend again; you will never wish even to have my name mentioned. And if I do what I ought not to do, then perhaps, you will be my friend—but I shall be unworthy of you."

"I don't know anything whatever about that," said Honora; "but I do know one thing. If you are in any sort of trouble (and perhaps your sister has got you into some trouble—for, to tell you the truth, Penelope, I do not greatly care for your sister, and I must say so just now), you will, of course do what is right."

"That is the dreadful thing my conscience said just now," said Penelope.

"Then you really are in great trouble, dear?"

"Don't call me dear," said Penelope. "I am in great trouble."

"On your own account?"

"Practically. I did wrong a little time ago, and it is reflecting on me; and anyhow, of course it *is* my trouble—and it's—Oh, Nora—don't touch me—don't look at of! Go away, please—I'm not fit for you to look at me. I belong to—to—the wicked people! Go away, Nora—you're so pure, and so—so—sort of—holy. I am frightened when I see you—let me be alone to-night!"

"It's your sister Brenda, it's not you!" said Honora, startled.

"Oh, don't blame her too much—please, please! She is my only sister. Oh, what shall I do!"

Penelope flung herself on her bed and burst into a tempest of weeping. Perhaps those tears really saved her brain, for the poor girl was absolutely distracted. While she wept, and wept, and wept, Honora knelt by her, now and then patting her shoulder gently, now and then uttering a word of prayer to God. For this was the sort of occasion when Honora's real religious training came strongly to the fore. She knew that her friend was tempted, that something had happened which could scarcely by any possibility come into her own life, and that if she did not stand by her now, she might fall.

"But I won't let her," thought the girl. "I'll stick by her through thick and thin. I love her—I didn't when I was at school, but I do now."

After a time, however, poor Penelope's tears ceased. Honora bent down and put her arm round her neck.

"I want to whisper something to you," she said. "I want to confide something. I was not nice to you at school. I thought you, somehow, not a bit the sort of girl that I could ever care for. Then, when I saw you act as Helen of Troy and look so transformed, it seemed to me that my eyes were opened about you, and I wanted to have you here much more badly than I wished to have any other girl here; and since you came, I have learned to love you. Now I don't love very, very easily—I mean I don't give my deepest love. Having given it, however, I cannot possibly take it back—it is yours for what it is worth. I know something terrible has happened, and I want you to do right, not wrong, for it is never worth while to do wrong. I want you to try and understand that here, and to-night—it is always worth while to do right, and never worth while to do wrong. So choose the right, darling; I will ask God to help you."

"But you don't know—you can't even guess!" sobbed Penelope.

“Do you think you could bring yourself to tell me? We are all alone here, in this dark room, for even the moon will soon set, and I am your true friend. Don’t you think you could just tell me everything?”

“Oh, I don’t know—no, I couldn’t—I couldn’t!” Penelope rose. “I have no words to thank you,” she continued. “You have comforted me, and perhaps—anyhow, I must have until the morning to think.”

“Very well,” said Honora, “I will go away to my own room and think of you all night, and pray for you, and in the morning, at seven o’clock, I will come back to you. Then, perhaps you will tell me—for you have got something to *do*, have you not?”

“I have to do something, or not to do something.”

“If you do that something, what will happen?”

“Apparently nothing, only I—”

“I understand,” said Honora. “The thing you have got to do is wrong. Suppose you don’t do it—”

“Then—then—oh, Honora—I could wish to-night that I had never lived to grow up to my present age. I’m nearly mad with misery!”

“I will come to you in the morning,” said Honora. “But before I go, I wish to say something—that of course you won’t do whatever the thing is; for if you keep yourself right, other things must come right somehow.”

Then Honora kissed Penelope, and left the room.

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Wonderful Dream.

Penelope stayed awake for a very long time after Honora had left her. When at last she fell asleep, however, she had a wonderful, an extraordinary dream.

She thought that an angel came into her room and looked down at her, and gave her the choice between the downward and the upward roads. The angel carried a crown in his hand; and he pointed to it, and said that it was the crown of thorns. He asked her if she thought that by any means she were worthy to wear it. He said that if she could prove herself to be thus worthy, nothing else really mattered.

Having said these words, he laid the crown by her side and went away, very slowly vanishing, first into thin mist, then into nothing. Penelope in her dream found herself all alone with the crown of thorns. The thorns were all glistening with dew drops, as though the crown had been freshly made. She noticed that the thorns were sharp and of the sort that might hurt her very much, were she to wear the crown.

Nevertheless, she started quite happily to her feet and, raising the crown, placed it for an instant on her head. It gave her very great pain but at the same time immense courage. She did not think she would mind even bitter shame if she was conscious of that crown surrounding her brow. She thought she would like to look at herself in the mirror and see her own reflection with the crown of thorns about her. She imagined, in her dream, that she crossed the room and stood before the long glass. She saw her own reflection quite distinctly—her white night dress with its frills, her little pale face, her golden hair. But—lo, and behold! the crown itself was invisible! She put up her hand to touch it. She felt it quite distinctly, and its thorns pierced her hand and hurt her head, but she could not see it. She stared hard at her own reflection. Then there came a noise outside the door and Penelope awoke.

She was lying in bed. The angel and the crown of thorns were only a dream. Nevertheless, she knew something that she had not known when she fell asleep. She knew now that it was quite impossible for her to choose the downward path, and she knew also that the crown of thorns made all things—even the most painful things of life—possible, if one were only doing right.

The noise outside her door had been made by Honora. Honora came in with her white dressing-gown wrapped round her, and her sweet, lofty-looking face more full of compassion and more serene, even, than usual. The moment Penelope saw her, she started up in bed and said with fervour:

“I have had a dream—the most wonderful in the world; and I know perfectly well, at last, what I am going to do, and you needn’t ask me any more. But I have made up my mind to choose the most difficult sight, and to reject the most easy Wrong.”

“There now,” said Honora, “I knew you would.”

“I can’t tell you any more just yet. You will know all; to-day—everybody will know all to-day.”

“You would really rather I did not know first!”

“It would be easier for me that you should not know first. But just tell me this. Is Mrs Hungerford really coming to-day?”

“Yes,” said Honora, in some surprise; “but I didn’t even know that you knew her.”

“I don’t really. Paulie was telling me about her last night, and how delighted she was at the thought of seeing her.

When will she come, Nora?”

“Oh, I think by quite an early train; she’ll be here probably about twelve o’clock.”

“Nora, do you think I might drive into Marshlands quite early, that is, immediately after breakfast? I want to see my sister Brenda.”

“Of course you may. Oh, how white you look! I trust you are not going to be ill!”

Penelope whispered to her own heart: “It’s only the pain that the crown gives, and I don’t mind that sort.” She said aloud, in almost a cheerful voice: “No, I’m not going to be ill,” and presently Honora left her.

Then Penelope rose and dressed and ran downstairs. She went into the garden, which was always fresh and beautiful. Once or twice she put her hand to her forehead, as though she would feel the crown and those thorns that pierced her brow and were so sweet and sustaining.

Breakfast was ready at the usual hour, and the children were gay and happy—the little Hungerfords wild with delight at the thought of seeing their mother, and Mary L’Estrange and Cara Burt were full of sympathy with regard to Penelope who, they thought, looked particularly nice that morning.

“I am so glad you have got over your headache,” said Mary.

“Oh, yes, quite,” replied Penelope.

“But you must be careful to-day,” said Cara; “you must stay a good deal in the shade, for it’s going to be hot—very hot—even hotter than yesterday.”

“I am obliged to go to Marshlands,” said Penelope; “but I shall be very careful,” she added.

The girls expostulated, and Cara called to Honora.

“Are you going to permit this, Nora? Penelope, after her bad headache, declares that she is going to Marshlands again to-day.”

“Yes; she has to go on some business,” replied Honora. “But it’s all right,” she added, “for I have ordered the phaeton with the hood, which shall be put up so that she’ll be sheltered from the rays of the sun.” Almost immediately after breakfast, Penelope started on her drive to Marshlands.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Restitution.

Mademoiselle was very restless. She had confided a little bit of her interview with Penelope to Mrs Dawson, and Mrs Dawson had much approved of what the Frenchwoman had done. The fact is, these two women had, more or less, sketched out a future together on the strength of the twenty pounds which Penelope would give as hush money with regard to the lost bangle.

“I will keep the bangle too,” said Mademoiselle. “It would not be at all safe to give it to either of the Carlton girls. You shall wear it sometimes, and I will wear it sometimes, and we might take the house next door to this, and do a thriving business next season.”

Mrs Dawson said once, in a feeble sort of way: “Isn’t it very wicked, though?”

“Wicked?” cried Mademoiselle, “when the poor have to live!” She held up her hands in expostulation. “Ah, Madame!” she said, “trust to me in this matter. I have been treated in the way the most cruel, and this is my small, my very small revenge.”

Mrs Dawson was fascinated, but even still not quite convinced. Brenda, meanwhile, knew nothing of that sword of Damocles which was hanging over her devoted head. Strange as it may seem, she had not looked at the bangle on the previous night, and none of the girls dared to tell her what had occurred. She was very cross, and exceedingly disappointed. Her hopes had fallen through. Her little money was largely spent—all to no effect. The holidays would, all too quickly, go by, and there was nothing before her but a dreary and most monotonous existence at the Reverend Josiah Amberley’s, with her very stupid pupils as companions.

As to Harry, of course he was hopeless. She would not have looked at him again. A merchant prince, indeed! He was nothing but the son of a fifth-rate tradesman. This fact accounted for his atrocious manners and for all his many delinquencies. Certainly Brenda was in the worst of humours, and the three little girls were by no means comfortable in her presence.

She was in her room on the following morning, and the girls were there too. They were there during the moment when she would discover that the valuable bangle had been changed, and were anxious to hurry her off to the seashore.

“Let’s come, and be quick,” said Nina. “What’s the good of being at the seaside if we’re not out enjoying the air? Dear papa will be vexed if we tell him that we have spent half our time in this poky, horrid room.”

“I wonder,” said Brenda, in response, “that a little girl dares to utter such untruths. And where’s your notebook, Nina?

Out with it, this minute!”

Nina coloured and then turned pale.

“I’ve lost it,” she said.

“Lost it—what do you mean?”

“Well, not that exactly. I—I’ve torn it up.”

“You wicked little girl!”

Brenda advanced towards poor Nina; but what might have happened was never known, for just at that moment there came a tap at the door, and in walked Penelope. There was a look on her face which the three little Amberleys had never seen there before; but Brenda had on one occasion, that great and auspicious occasion when her younger sister had stood spellbound under the full rays of the electric light, acting the part of Helen of Troy. There was the same rapt gaze, the same expression in her eyes, which seemed to say: “Where’er I came I brought calamity.” Brenda did not know why her heart sank so low in her breast, why the petty, trivial things which had been annoying her a moment before sank utterly out of sight. Penelope looked round at the three girls.

“I want to speak to Brenda,” she said. “Brenda, can I see you alone.”

“You had better go out, girls, as Penelope chooses to be so mysterious,” said Brenda, recovering herself, and speaking in a sulky tone.

It did not take the girls long to put on their sailor hats, and a moment later they had left the room. Then Penelope turned the key in the lock.

“It has come, Brenda,” she said. “I don’t want to reproach you or to say a cross word; but there’s only one thing to be done.”

“What in the wide world do you mean?” said Brenda. “What reason have you for all these heroics?”

“I know about you,” said Penelope then. “It,”—her voice quivered—“has broken my heart! But there is only one thing to be done. You must come back with me to Beverley Castle, and bring the bangle with you.”

“The bangle?” said Brenda.

She had been fairly cool until now. But now she trembled exceedingly, and leaned up against the wardrobe. She did not even ask what bangle.

“You stole Nellie Hungerford’s bangle on the day of the break-up at Hazlitt Chase,” pursued Penelope. “You put people on the wrong scent with regard to it. Where you found it and how—I don’t know, but you did find it.”

“How can you possibly, possibly tell?” gasped Brenda then.

“For the beat of all reasons—I have seen it.”

“Seen it—seen it? the lost bangle?”

“I saw it last night. Mademoiselle got possession of it—I can’t exactly say how—but she managed to get to your drawer and found it.”

“I don’t believe a word of it!” began Brenda.

“It is true,” said Penelope. “There is no way out, Brenda, except by the one painful way. You and I must see Mrs Hungerford to-day, and return the bangle. There is no other possible way out.”

“But—but—I didn’t do it,” began Brenda.

“Oh, poor Brenda!” said Penelope. “Why will you add to all the misery by telling lies? You know you did it. I will call Mademoiselle.”

She turned swiftly and left her sister standing in the middle of the room. The very instant this happened, Brenda flew up to the little ornament on the shelf on the over-mantel, took out the key, and opened the drawer. She laid her hand on the box on which she had written Fanchon’s name, opened it, and took out the false bangle. She was looking at it in a sort of stunned way, when Mademoiselle, accompanied by Mrs Dawson, came in.

“Ah!” said Mademoiselle, whose face was white with rage; for she never expected that Penelope would act as she had done. “You are the thief—convicted in the very act!” and she pointed with a finger of scorn at Brenda.

“You’re a nice young woman to have as a visitor in my respectable house!” said Mrs Dawson.

“*Pauvre petite*! She looks as if she could faint,” said Mademoiselle, who still did not give up hope of obtaining money and having the affair hushed up. “Why, will her own sister ruin her! The thing can be—oh, not spoken of, but put away in the most secret of the heart’s recesses—buried there for all time. A leetle—a very leetle money, will do this.”

“No,” said Penelope, turning and flashing her eyes upon her. “You tempted me last night, but I am thankful to say your temptation has not the smallest attraction for me any longer. I want you, and Mrs Dawson—if she likes—and

Brenda to come back with me immediately to the Castle; and you, Mademoiselle, who so cleverly discovered the bangle, will receive your reward. But the bangle itself must be returned. Fetch it, please; for there is no time to lose."

"Then you will," said Mademoiselle, "with your own hands, send your only young sister to prison! Oh, the hardness of your heart!"

Penelope made no reply to that, but as she glanced at Brenda, who was absolutely silent—all the brilliant colour gone from her pretty face, the hand of age itself seeming to steal over her features—such a sharp pain went through the younger girl's heart that, involuntarily, she put her hand to her brow as though to feel the weight of the crown of thorns. Whatever that actually signified, it seemed to comfort her and steady her resolves. She turned to Brenda, and said quickly: "Will you get ready at once, dear?" And Mademoiselle, seeing that she was defeated, went out of the room, and brought the bangle.

"I myself convey it to the Castle," she said. "I will myself relate the story, and will claim that shabby reward which has been offered for the recovery of the lost treasure."

"That is exactly as you like. And would Mrs Dawson wish to accompany you—"

"No," said Mrs Dawson, "not I. I have had nothing to do with this thing. I had my suspicions on the night when I saw such an unsuitable ornament on Miss Fanchon's wrist. There is nothing whatever for me to do but to request that the Misses Amberley be removed from my house as soon as possible—"

"Oh, that is for afterwards," interrupted Penelope. "Brenda has got something to do first. Come, Brenda, shall I find your hat? The sooner we get this over, the better."

"But I won't go—I won't!" suddenly shrieked Brenda. "I have not confessed; I have admitted nothing. Why should I not have a bangle of my own. Is Nellie Hungerford's the only one in the world?"

"The queer coincidence of the engraving exactly alike on the bangle which contains the most precious ruby and on this bangle which holds the turquoise of great beauty makes it scarcely probable, *mon enfant*," said Mademoiselle. As she spoke, she held up the glittering toy for Penelope to see. "I will go and put on my neat bonnet and be ready to accompany you, young ladies," she said.

Thus it came to pass that, half an hour later, a miserable, cowed-looking girl entered the phaeton and took her place by Mademoiselle's side. Penelope occupied the little seat in front. No one spoke during that miserable drive, but that aged look was still perceptible on Brenda's face, and the colour had absolutely left her cheeks. Once Penelope tried to take her sister's hand, but Brenda pulled it roughly away.

At last, they all reached Castle Beverley. Mrs Hungerford was there with her two little girls, and Honora was watching for Penelope with more anxiety in her heart than she cared to own. When she saw that Penelope had brought her sister and the French governess back with her, she guessed at once that something important must have occurred. The three got out.

"This is for me my hour of triumph," said Mademoiselle. But she uttered the words without any jauntiness, for the look on Brenda's face appalled even her gay and wicked spirit.

Penelope went straight up to Nora.

"I have brought my sister and Mademoiselle; and will Mrs Hungerford come—and will you come, Honora? The sooner we get this over, the better."

"Oh—I can't," murmured Brenda, in a passionate voice under her breath.

"You can—you must. It is the only, only way," whispered Penelope then.

With these words, she determinedly took her sister's hand, and the three went into the small room opening out of the front hall, while Honora ran to fetch Mrs Hungerford. When that lady appeared, being much amazed at this hasty summons, she was startled at the aspect of the little group who awaited her. There was Penelope, with still that Helen-of-Troy expression on her face. There was Brenda, aged for the time being, and shrinking; and there was Mademoiselle, with her wicked eyes gleaming.

The moment Mrs Hungerford entered, Mademoiselle marched up to her.

"I claim the so great reward," she said. "You did advertise for this very leetle trinket, and behold! I it to you restore. Look at it—it is the one that you have lost. Ponder it—and consider it well. Compare it with the bracelet your little daughter Pauline wears, and see if it is not, in very truth, the lost bangle."

"It most certainly is," said Mrs Hungerford; "and you have found it? Pardon me—I do not know your name."

"Mademoiselle d'Etienne—at your service. I have had the so high privilege to teach your young daughters the elegancies of our French tongue at that select seminary, Hazlitt Chase. I know when the bangle was missing, and the sore grief it was to the *chère petite* who had lost it. Through a series of adventures I have found it again, and I lay it on your lap. You can give it to the child for whom it was purchased."

"But how did you get it?"

"Ah! There I have a *histoire* the most pathetic, the most wonderful, the most *extra-ordinaire* to relate."

“No,” interrupted Penelope, suddenly, “the time has come for Brenda to speak. Brenda, tell what you know.”

“There’s no use in concealing it,” said Brenda. “I am not sorry—I mean, I’m only sorry to be found out. Mrs Hungerford, this is what happened. Do you remember driving up with me to Hazlitt Chase on the day of the prize-giving? You stepped—oh—out of the carriage, and as you did so you dropped the bangle on the ground, I saw it: I coveted it: I took it: I slipped it into my pocket. I put you off the scent by telling my sister that doubtless you had dropped it in the train. I am the thief. I await my punishment: it is prison, it it not? Very well; I have confessed. I think it is most likely that Mr Beverley is a magistrate. He can send for the police, and put me into prison. I stole the bangle: Mademoiselle found it. I am a thief, and Penelope is the sister of one. That is all.”

“Oh, poor girl!” said Mrs Hungerford. She rose slowly from her seat and left the room. In a few minutes she returned. She brought with her three sovereigns and three shillings.

“These are for you,” she said to Mademoiselle. “This is the reward offered. You have led to the discovery of the bangle—I don’t want to know how—take your reward, and go.”

“Yes, please go at once,” said Honora.

There was a quality in her young voice which the Frenchwoman had never heard before, and there was such a ring of scorn in Mrs Hungerford’s tone that it seemed—as Mademoiselle afterwards expressed it—“to wither even the very vitals.” She took her money sulkily and, without a word, left the presence of the others, never to be seen by them again.

What followed can be easily explained. Mrs Hungerford was a good woman. Honora had learned some lessons in the higher life. Now Mrs Hungerford and Honora were certainly not going to punish Penelope, and their one earnest desire was to rescue Brenda.

They left the sisters alone for a short time, and talked together.

“That poor, poor, pretty girl!” said Mrs Hungerford. “Oh, of course what she did was dreadful, but we just mustn’t let her go under, must we, Honora?”

“I knew you would feel like that,” said Honora, “I felt certain of it. You can little guess what Penelope has suffered; she is a splendid girl. Her mission at present in life is to help her sister.”

“Now listen.”

Mrs Hungerford proposed a plan which was eventually carried out. This was no less than, first and foremost, to assure Brenda of her absolute forgiveness.

“You acted very badly indeed,” she said; “but I am not going to call the police, nor to put you in prison. Your punishment will be that those who know you will have to be acquainted with what has occurred. You had much better not return to the boarding-house, but stay here. Your little pupils must go back to their father, for I do not think it right that they should be with you any longer. As to you—I want you and Penelope to do something for me.”

“I to do anything for you?” said Brenda, her eyes suddenly growing soft and a new expression stealing over her face.

“Yes. My house in the country is empty at present. Will you and Penelope go there to-day and live there quietly until the holidays come to an end? I can put you on the way. When the holidays are over, Penelope will, of course, return to Hazlitt Chase, and I myself will do my utmost to get you a post which I think you may suit—not as teacher to the young, for you have not the necessary qualifications.”

From the thought of prison, the magistrates, the handcuffs, which she might possibly wear, the public examination, the trial—to going away with Penelope to Mrs Hungerford’s own house was such a relief to the miserable Brenda that, all of a sudden, she gave way utterly.

“There—now I am sorry really!” she said. “I was not a bit sorry when every one was hard to me, but I am bitterly sorry now!”

Mrs Hungerford’s arrangements were carried out in full detail. The little Amberleys were invited up to the Castle until the Reverend Josiah could be summoned. He came on the following morning, and was told in full the sad story about Brenda. He was greatly shocked, but begged that the knowledge of what had occurred should be kept from his daughters.

“I am afraid they suspect a great deal,” said Mrs Beverley, who of course had been taken into confidence.

“Poor children, life is hard on them!” said dear papa, “and I did think Brenda such a sweet young creature. How frightfully we were deceived! But I must take them back, and get Miss Juggins to teach them in future.”

“Perhaps you would allow me to recommend a particularly nice girl to be their governess,” here interposed Mrs Beverley.

“Oh, Madam, do you know of one?”

“I do—I have known her since she was a child. I think she would go to you, and help your little girls. Her name is Lydia Hamburg. You can see her if you like, for she lives close by.”

Lydia Hamburg, who was all that Brenda Carlton was not, did eventually find herself installed as governess to the little Amberleys; and as she was faithful and true, the wheels of life ran smoothly at the rectory, and the girls turned out, on the whole, better than might have been expected.

As to Brenda, hers was a difficult and—it must be owned—a worthless character. Not all Penelope's earnestness and faithful love would make her really see the enormity of her crime in its full light. But, nevertheless, even she had learned a lesson and, in future, would not lend herself to such open sin as heretofore. Mrs Hungerford arranged that she was to leave England, with a party who were going to Canada; for in a fresh land, she might do better.

These things have all happened, and the characters in this story have moved on a little way in life's journey. To each has been meted out a due share of cloud and sunshine, and those who have done wrong have each in their turn suffered.

But Penelope has never forgotten her dream, nor the feeling of that blessed crown of thorns, and she and Honora Beverley are the best and truest of friends.

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