

1. A SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

Bessborough Gardens is located near the Tate Museum very close to the Thames Rives. In the thick mist of a damp night you can lose yourself. The dampness penetrates the soul.

She felt like a ghost haunting the small park. There she promised to wait for her lover. And it was a promise forever. Even if he would not come, her spirit would fill the small park.

The girls of St. Ingrid's Academy have always taken their art lessons at the National Gallery. They all sat together and stared attentively at the canvases. The girls laboriously tried to capture the shadowing technique of the Spanish painter Zubarin. Helena and Ruby were at the back of the group. Already they were delving into the joys of womanhood. To them, it seemed as if their friends were immersed in silly crushes. They wanted real passion. In their art, they left no doubt. They shaded the muscles to show strength. One could almost touch their images until the feelings of the heart just gushed forth.

Still there was this idealism that colored their work. They had drawn their models from anatomy books. Or from men in magazines who spent their time sculpting themselves in the gym. They tended to favor such forms over those of the actual carpenter with his uneven muscular development. It was the maturity of the artist that recognized the real power of the muscle and captured it in his representation.

Helena and Ruby particularly loved the skulls that gave these pictures the air of the macabre. It also made their vision seem more forbidden. They stared at St. Francis with his skull and imagined a tainted love in the religious representation. They both looked at each other and giggled.

They were filling out their school uniforms. They liked to wear them tight. It made their loveliness contemplate a bit of sin. It gave them a special appeal. When boys would pass them in the street, they would give them that sizzling whistle.

Helena was just seventeen. She look more experienced than she was. But this look gave her the edge that she needed over the other girls. She would go for long walks at night, and then return in the morning with bizarre stories from the fog.

"You have to know what happens to girls who get lost out there at night."

She claimed to know all about it. She promised that she wouldn't only kiss but would indeed tell.

Her grandmother had sent her to England to study. She feared the least curiosity on her part might send her on the wayward path of her mother. She really had nothing to fear. It wasn't as if her mother had denied her daughter. She never really claimed that the child was her niece or her cousin. But Caroline never wanted a baby to get int the way of her boisterous life style. And Nana had realized the same thing about poor Helena. She sent her to England to live with her Great Aunt Martha. And Martha had just the school for her.

"You mean that I'm going to live in a castle."

"Not quite, child," replied her knowing grandmother. Still, Helena never knew when she might meet a prince who would whisk her way to a life of luxury.

As she became older, she felt more and more the need to act out her rebellion. Still, she had always been a sensible girl. She seemed to take after her grandmother more than her mother. Nevertheless, the fear of dissipation meant that her natural desires needed to be curtailed before they arose.

She didn't really miss her mother. She had never been around much. There were always new fortunes to conquer. Nana had been a suitable substitute. But it still left much for Helena to discover on her own. St. Ingrid's was the perfect place to indulge her mischief.

The more that her stories spread around the school, the more she felt the need to outdo herself.

"You don't smoke, do you?" asked one of her sister students.

"Of course not, it's a nasty habit."

"How about making love? What kind of lover are you?"

"What do you like best about love-making?"

She realized that they were hunting for specific details.

"I like it all."

Jean joined in. She seemed all knowing. "I've never seen you with a boy."

"I date men. Not young boys. Boys are just too clumsy in bed. You know the old in and out."

She was trying to appear knowledgeable. She seemed too frank for some of the girls. Jean still felt that she was going to expose her.

"Anthony Richmond's having a party at his place this weekend. I'm sure you know him. We'll all be there. He's got some real adult stuff planned. You know what I mean."

"I know him. Of course, I do. I might stop by."

As they walked back to their room, Ruby pulled her aside.

"What are you saying to her? You're going to have to put your money where your mouth is."

The two girls were hardly the mousy types. Their faces said it all. Any boy could hardly refuse either of them.

"Have you even kissed a boy?" Ruby quizzed her.

"Yes. Sort of."

She lacked the knowing passion that she was going to need for her night out. Maybe she could at least get a dress that would show off her attributes. She had ambitions.

Helena did everything that she could to find out about Anthony Richmond. He was a college boy already in his twenties. He knew women. And women knew him. And he had a title. His father was some kind of duke or something. That meant that his son was some kind of something or whatever.

"It's all very appealing!"

Ruby tried to contradict her, "Appealing. I hear that he's a dog. He eats women alive."

"What are you saying?"

"That he likes to get girls good and drunk and then bed them for just one night. Then leave them to fend for themselves."

"If that's the way that this Duke of whatever does his bidding, I'll show him a time."

"Sure you will, Helena."

And she was ready to do battle.

"I just have to get myself out of this stupid uniform."

"You're going to have to get yourself out of this place. There's going to be a lock down at St. Ingrid's tonight."

She didn't want to be the only one in the premises after curfew. She pulled out her new dress and ran her fingers along the shiny material.

"They are going to see something tonight."

The dress made her quite the knock out. It gave her a look far beyond her years. It was low-cut and playful. It made her feel like nothing could stand in her way.

Ruby and Helena hadn't realized what was in store for them when they reached the location of the party. As they waited to get in they heard a couple of girls turned away at the door.

"This is by invitation only, girls." The group scampered away wailing and cursing.

Ruby turned to Helena, "We better leave."

"Ruby, I didn't come all this way to get turned back. We are going in."

Helena looked too mature to turn away at the door. The one boy just stared at her. And Ruby seemed as if she had never heard anyone say no to her in her life.

They walked in rather casually. After a while they realized that they looked rather conspicuous at the party. They were both standing alone in the corner. Helena, was downing gin and tonics like there was no tomorrow

"Helena, you're going to get sick."

"I've seen my mother do this all the time."

"She's an adult. She's probably developed a tolerance to that sort of thing."

"I'm good. I've done it before too."

"Sure, you have."

She was looking at a tall boy in a suit jacket. He had his hair in his eyes.

"Helena, he's coming here."

"Hide!"

"How can we hide?"

He started talking to Helena, "I've never seen you before."

"Oh, I've been here all the time."

"Really now."

The liquor gave her added courage.

"Yeah, we come to parties here all the time."

"Where do you go to school, my dear?"

"I'm at Saint Ingrid's."

She looked back at him. He looked very grown up. He tossed his hair from out of his eyes. "I'm at the London School of Economics."

She tried to look impressed. He kept talking, "What your name?"

"It's Helena."

He smiled. "Helena, you're a picture of loveliness." It looked as if he was going to walk away. She wanted to know who he was.

"What's your name?" she asked timidly.

"I'm Tony, Tony Richmond."

Her face turned white and she tried to look away, "I'm ..." She couldn't speak another word.

"We're going to have a little fun in the back room. It might be too intense for you

Helena. But the door's open."

The only door that she wanted to walk through was the front door. She scored another drink to take the edge of her embarrassment.

"He was watching me all the time. I bet he's afraid that I'm going to steal something."

The girls made it back to St. Ingrid's before anyone knew the difference. It was their dear *friend* Jean who would have to answer for the troubles at the party. She was actually caught trying to get back to her room. The headmistress was furious the next day. She gave everyone a piece of her mind.

"One of our girls passed out at the party. It was an absolute disgrace. There was even a claim that another girl brought drugs to the party. I will get to the bottom of this"

Ruby turned to Helena, "Jean spilled her guts in the hope of deflecting guilt from herself"

"I never trusted that little bitch!"

Jean ended up giving up a list of all the partygoers. By the time the headmistress was through with her, she had given up Anthony Richmond. It only became worse. Under the threat of legal action Tony's parents showed up at the school for a conference. Before it was all over Helena became the center of the investigation. She was called to the office.

"Mr. Anthony Richmond described how you were the girl who brought the offending drugs to the party."

"I did nothing of the sort. Did he actually say that?" Helena tried to deny everything. None of it was true.

"It's in black and white. His parents showed me the diary entry. They let me copy it."

The headmistress presented her evidence.

This lovely American girl crashed the party. I was taken by her. She brought some coke with her. I caught her doing it in my bathroom. So she invited me back with her where I snorted it off her left breast. What a kick! The things girls will do after a little funny powder!

She didn't know what to say. This was obviously his private diary.

"Everybody makes up things in their diary. None of this can be corroborated. I'm being railroaded."

The family needed to take the heat off. The mother had found the exculpatory evidence to free her son. And Helena was going to have to take the fall. She wanted to protest more but realized that the upshot of it all would get her out of St. Ingrid's. She herself threatened legal action.

"I'm an American citizen. I demand my rights. Innocent until *proven* guilty."

The school settled it all behind the scenes. Helena would be let go from St. Ingrid's, but her record would bear no reference to the expulsion. It would attest to her fine work at the school.

Ruby was waiting in the room when Helena went back to pack up her things. She explained herself to Ruby, "He claimed that I was trying to seduce him so he wouldn't throw me out of the party. Then the head mistress called my behavior outlandish and told me that I was a terrible representative of St. Ingrid's."

"I thought that you hated it here."

"I do. You hate it too."

"I didn't get caught like you."

“You could tell them that you were with me.”

“My parents would kill me. St. Ingrid’s been in the family for years.”

Helena’s art teacher left her with one consolation

“I’m sorry that they’re making you go. You were one of the best students that we’ve ever had. You added a ray of light to this rather bleak environment.”

She could hardly bear ill-will against Tony. He was the reason that she had escaped. Besides, his prying mother never should have gone through his stuff. He never knew anyone would see his diary and its exaggerations. What really went on in that back room that night?

When she reached her aunt’s house her head was hung low. She apologized to her aunt, “I’m sorry that I brought ill-repute on the house.”

Her aunt was completely understanding, “It wasn’t your fault. What’s the big deal about sneaking out for a couple of drinks.

“I’m still sorry.”

Her aunt continued the defense of her niece, “You were turned in by a snitch trying to save her own skin. They needed a sacrificial lamb. The Tony Richmonds and Jean Harmons of the world never answer for their own behavior.”

“I really don’t mind going back to the States.”

“There’s not very much more that we can do for you here. You’re always welcome back.”

She was given credit for the school year. She was actually in a great position to apply for colleges in the States. She accepted her liberation gracefully.

Helena looked out the window as the plane started to take off from London. This would be one of many times that she would leave the city after a cataclysmic event. She took it all in stride. She was very philosophical about the whole thing. She would miss London. But great adventures lay ahead of her.