

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## Helen

by Sue Hitchcock

I was only twelve, when they brought me here from Egypt to be her slave. Because I spoke no Greek, I only knew I was to be her handmaid and they had chosen me because the opinions of her were neither known to me, nor was I to be told, so what I tell you now is my own opinion.

She was very beautiful, but too thin and her brow was often furrowed and her mouth downturned. My job was to care for her body and make sure she looked as she should for her husband, the lord Menelaus. Every night I oiled her hair, which was a beautiful red colour, without even using henna. As I ran my fingers through it, she would shut her eyes and her brow would smooth out. Then she did look beautiful, but sometimes tears would dribble down and I knew she was grieving.

Now I have learned the language, I know that she is the lady of the house and must behave with dignity, but it is a punishment for loving a young man from Troy, whom her husband killed. It might have been a kindness, if he had killed her too, but she is the daughter of Zeus and the benefits of sparing her were too great to ignore. Menelaus wouldn't allow her to bring anyone from Troy to comfort her, but I do my best.

She wasn't so young, but still in her prime. She had been away for ten years and her daughter, Hermione had grown into a young woman, almost as lovely as her mother. Resentment soured her, the memory of her mother having been poisoned by her father. A husband could not be found for the daughter of such a woman and she became bitter. Helen wasn't even allowed to speak to her.

Of course Menelaus still came to his wife's bed, and though she had me bring many jugs of water to wash the morning after, Helen still gave birth to several children. Over the years she grew fat, food her sole consolation for the guilt she felt. She became stately and dignified and I would adorn her with the earrings and jewels, for which she cared little. She did her duty, but Menelaus treated her with no respect.

Sometimes we would walk down to the quay together and she would talk to sailors who had come from Troy, but they gave the saddest news of the slow rebuilding of the city and our climb back to the palace was in silence.

Only in the hot afternoon was she able to disrobe and in the simplest garments to bathe her infants or, as they grew, to play with them in the pool outside her room. They knew nothing of her beauty and pulled her greying hair, or made faces in response to her playful distortions, crossing eyes, poking out tongues and rolling about in tickling games. Then I thought her beautiful – warm and cuddly as my own mother was.