

# Helen of Troy



**Andrew Lang**

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“Le joyeux temps passé souloit estre occasion que je faisoie de plaisants diz et gracieuses chançonnetes et ballades. Mais je me suis mis à faire cette traictié d’affliction contre ma droite nature ... et suis content de l’avoir prinse, car mes douleurs me semblent en estre allegées.”—*Le*

*Romant de Troilus.*

To all old Friends; to all who dwell  
Where Avon dhu and Avon gel  
Down to the western waters flow  
Through valleys dear from long ago;  
To all who hear the whisper’d spell  
Of Ken; and Tweed like music swell  
Hard by the Land Debatable,  
Or gleaming Shannon seaward go,—  
To all old Friends!  
To all that yet remember well  
What secrets Isis had to tell,  
How lazy Cherwell loiter’d slow  
Sweet aisles of blossom’d May below—  
Whate’er befall, whate’er befell,  
To *all* old Friends.

**Part 1**  
**THE COMING OF PARIS**

Of the coming of Paris to the house of Menelaus, King of Lacedaemon,  
and of the tale Paris told concerning his past life.

I.

All day within the palace of the King  
In Lacedaemon, was there revelry,  
Since Menelaus with the dawn did spring  
Forth from his carven couch, and, climbing high  
The tower of outlook, gazed along the dry  
White road that runs to Pylos through the plain,  
And mark'd thin clouds of dust against the sky,  
And gleaming bronze, and robes of purple stain.

II.

Then cried he to his serving men, and all  
Obey'd him, and their labour did not spare,  
And women set out tables through the hall,  
Light polish'd tables, with the linen fair.  
And water from the well did others bear,  
And the good house-wife busily brought forth  
Meats from her store, and stinted not the rare  
Wine from Ismarian vineyards of the North.

III.

The men drave up a heifer from the field  
For sacrifice, and sheath'd her horns with gold;  
And strong Boethous the axe did wield  
And smote her; on the fruitful earth she roll'd,  
And they her limbs divided; fold on fold  
They laid the fat, and cast upon the fire  
The barley grain. Such rites were wrought of old  
When all was order'd as the Gods desire.

IV.

And now the chariots came beneath the trees  
Hard by the palace portals, in the shade,  
And Menelaus knew King Diocles  
Of Pherae, sprung of an unhappy maid  
Whom the great Elian River God betray'd  
In the still watches of a summer night,  
When by his deep green water-course she stray'd  
And lean'd to pluck his water-lilies white.

V.

Besides King Diocles there sat a man  
Of all men mortal sure the fairest far,  
For o'er his purple robe Sidonian  
His yellow hair shone brighter than the star  
Of the long golden locks that bodeth war;  
His face was like the sunshine, and his blue  
Glad eyes no sorrow had the spell to mar  
Were clear as skies the storm hath thunder'd through.

VI.

Then Menelaus spake unto his folk,  
And eager at his word they ran amain,  
And loosed the sweating horses from the yoke,  
And cast before them spelt, and barley grain.  
And lean'd the polish'd car, with golden rein,  
Against the shining spaces of the wall;  
And called the sea-rovers who follow'd fain  
Within the pillar'd fore-courts of the hall.

VII.

The stranger-prince was follow'd by a band  
Of men, all clad like rovers of the sea,  
And brown'd were they as is the desert sand,  
Loud in their mirth, and of their bearing free;  
And gifts they bore, from the deep treasury  
And forests of some far-off Eastern lord,  
Vases of gold, and bronze, and ivory,  
That might the Pythian fane have over-stored.

VIII.

Now when the King had greeted Diocles  
And him that seem'd his guest, the twain were led  
To the dim polish'd baths, where, for their ease,  
Cool water o'er their lustrous limbs was shed;  
With oil anointed was each goodly head  
By Asteris and Phylo fair of face;  
Next, like two gods for loveliness, they sped  
To Menelaus in the banquet-place.

IX.

There were they seated at the King's right hand,  
And maidens bare them bread, and meat, and wine,  
Within that fair hall of the Argive land  
Whose doors and roof with gold and silver shine  
As doth the dwelling-place of Zeus divine.

And Helen came from forth her fragrant bower  
The fairest lady of immortal line,  
Like morning, when the rosy dawn doth flower.

X.

Adraste set for her a shining chair,  
Well-wrought of cedar-wood and ivory;  
And beautiful Alcippe led the fair,  
The well-beloved child, Hermione,—  
A little maiden of long summers three—  
Her star-like head on Helen's breast she laid,  
And peep'd out at the strangers wistfully  
As is the wont of children half afraid.

XI.

Now when desire of meat and drink was done,  
And ended was the joy of minstrelsy,  
Queen Helen spake, beholding how the sun  
Within the heaven of bronze was riding high:  
“Truly, my friends, methinks the hour is nigh  
When men may crave to know what need doth bring  
To Lacedaemon, o'er wet ways and dry,  
This prince that bears the sceptre of a king?”

XII.

“Yea, or perchance a God is he, for still  
The great Gods wander on our mortal ways,  
And watch their altars upon mead or hill  
And taste our sacrifice, and hear our lays,  
And now, perchance, will heed if any prays,  
And now will vex us with unkind control,  
But anywise must man live out his days,  
For Fate hath given him an enduring soul.”

XIII.

“Then tell us, prithee, all that may be told,  
And if thou art a mortal, joy be thine!  
And if thou art a God, then rich with gold  
Thine altar in our palace court shall shine,  
With roses garlanded and wet with wine,  
And we shall praise thee with unceasing breath;  
Ah, then be gentle as thou art divine,  
And bring not on us baneful Love or Death!”

XIV.



Then spake the stranger,—as when to a maid  
A young man speaks, his voice was soft and low,—  
“Alas, no God am I; be not afraid,  
For even now the nodding daisies grow  
Whose seed above my grassy cairn shall blow,  
When I am nothing but a drift of white  
Dust in a cruse of gold; and nothing know  
But darkness, and immeasurable Night.

XV.

“The dawn, or noon, or twilight, draweth near  
When one shall smite me on the bridge of war,  
Or with the ruthless sword, or with the spear,  
Or with the bitter arrow flying far.  
But as a man’s heart, so his good days are,  
That Zeus, the Lord of Thunder, giveth him,  
Wherefore I follow Fortune, like a star,  
Whate’er may wait me in the distance dim.

XVI.

“Now all men call me Paris, Priam’s son,  
Who widely rules a peaceful folk and still.  
Nay, though ye dwell afar off, there is none  
But hears of Ilios on the windy hill,  
And of the plain that the two rivers fill  
With murmuring sweet streams the whole year long,  
And walls the Gods have wrought with wondrous skill  
Where cometh never man to do us wrong.

XVII.

“Wherefore I sail’d not here for help in war,  
Though well the Argives in such need can aid.  
The force that comes on me is other far;  
One that on all men comes: I seek the maid  
Whom golden Aphrodite shall persuade  
To lay her hand in mine, and follow me,  
To my white halls within the cedar shade  
Beyond the waters of the barren sea.”

XVIII.

Then at the Goddess’ name grew Helen pale,  
Like golden stars that flicker in the dawn,  
Or like a child that hears a dreadful tale,  
Or like the roses on a rich man’s lawn,  
When now the suns of Summer are withdrawn,