

Helen of Troy

by

Andrew Lang

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Prologue

"Le joyeux temps passe souloit estre occasion que je faisoie de plaisants diz et gracieuses chanconnetes et ballades. Mais je me suis mis a faire cette traittie d'affliction contre ma droite nature . . . et suis content de l'avoir prinse, car mes douleurs me semblent en estre allegees."--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.

Book 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 anyway 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.

"For sultry is the summer, that allows
To mortal men no sweeter boon than rest;
And surely such a tale as thine is best
To make the dainty-footed hours go by,
Till sinks the sun in darkness and the West,
And soft stars lead the Night along the sky."

XXI.

Then at the word of Helen Paris spoke,
 "My tale is shorter than a summer day,
My mother, ere I saw the light, awoke,
 At dawn, in Ilios, shrieking in dismay,
 Who dream'd that 'twixt her feet there fell and lay
A flaming brand, that utterly burn'd down
 To dust of crumbling ashes red and grey,
The coronal of towers and all Troy town.

XXII.

"Then the interpretation of this dream
 My father sought at many priestly hands,
Where the white temple doth in Pytho gleam,
 And at the fane of Ammon in the sands,
 And where the oak tree of Dodona stands
With boughs oracular against the sky,
 And with one voice the Gods from all the lands,
Cried out, 'The child must die, the child must die.'

XXIII.

"Then was I born to sorrow; and in fear
 The dark priest took me from my sire, and bore
A wailing child through beech and pinewood drear,
 Up to the knees of Ida, and the hoar
 Rocks whence a fountain breaketh evermore,
And leaps with shining waters to the sea,
 Through black and rock-wall'd pools without a shore,
And there they deem'd they took farewell of me.

XXIV.

"But round my neck they tied a golden ring
 That fell from Ganymedes when he soar'd
High over Ida on the eagle's wing,
 To dwell for ever with the Gods adored,
 To be the cup-bearer beside the board
Of Zeus, and kneel at the eternal throne,
 A jewel 'twas from old King Tros's hoard,
That ruled in Ilios ages long ago.

XXV.

"And there they left me in that dell untrod,
 Shepherd nor huntsman ever wanders there,
For dread of Pan, that is a jealous God,
 Yea, and the ladies of the streams forbear
 The Naiad nymphs, to weave their dances fair,

Or twine their yellow tresses with the shy
Fronds of forget-me-not and maiden-hair,
There had the priests appointed me to die.

XXVI.

"But vainly doth a man contend with Fate!
My father had less pity on his son
Than wild things of the woodland desolate.
'Tis said that ere the Autumn day was done
A great she-bear, that in these rocks did wonn,
Beheld a sleeping babe she did convey
Down to a den beheld not of the sun,
The cavern where her own soft litter lay.

XXVII.

"And therein was I nurtured wondrously,
So Rumour saith: I know not of these things,
For mortal men are ever wont to lie,
Whene'er they speak of sceptre-bearing kings:
I tell what I was told, for memory brings
No record of those days, that are as deep
Lost as the lullaby a mother sings
In ears of children that are fallen on sleep.

XXVIII.

"Men say that now five autumn days had pass'd,
When Agelaus, following a hurt deer,
Trod soft on crackling acorns, and the mast
That lay beneath the oak and beech-wood sere,
In dread lest angry Pan were sleeping near,
Then heard a cry from forth a cavern grey,
And peeping round the fallen rocks in fear,
Beheld where in the wild beast's tracks I lay.

XXIX.

"So Agelaus bore me from the wild,
Down to his hut; and with his children I
Was nurtured, being, as was deem'd, the child
Of Hermes, or some mountain deity;
For these with the wild nymphs are wont to lie
Within the holy caverns, where the bee
Can scarcely find a darkling path to fly
Through veils of bracken and the ivy-tree.

XXX.

"So with the shepherds on the hills I stray'd,
And drave the kine to feed where rivers run,
And play'd upon the reed-pipe in the shade,
And scarcely knew my manhood was begun,
The pleasant years still passing one by one,
Till I was chiefest of the mountain men,
And clomb the peaks that take the snow and sun,
And braved the anger'd lion in his den.

XXXI.

"Now in my herd of kine was one more dear
By far than all the rest, and fairer far;
A milkwhite bull, the captive of my spear,
And all the wondering shepherds called him STAR:
And still he led his fellows to the war,
When the lean wolves against the herds came down,
Then would he charge, and drive their hosts afar
Beyond the pastures to the forests brown.

XXXII.

"Now so it chanced that on an autumn morn,
King Priam sought a goodly bull to slay
In memory of his child, no sooner born
Than midst the lonely mountains cast away,
To die ere scarce he had beheld the day;
And Priam's men came wandering afar
To that green pool where by the flocks I lay,
And straight they coveted the goodly STAR,

XXXIII.

"And drave him, no word spoken, to the town:
One man mine arrow lit on, and he fell;
His comrades held me off, and down and down,
Through golden windings of the autumn dell,
They spurr'd along the beast that loved me well,
Till red were his white sides; I following,
Wrath in my heart, their evil deeds to tell
In Ilios, at the footstool of the King.

XXXIV.

"But ere they came to the God-builded wall,
They spied a meadow by the water-side,
And there the men of Troy were gathered all

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