

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909)

31 *The Worm of Spindlestoneheugh*

Lady Helen sat in Spindlestoneheugh  
With gold across her hair;  
For every plait was on her head,  
I wot a gold piece was there.

Lady Helen sat in Spindlestoneheugh 5  
With gold across her head;  
The green gown on her fair body  
Was woven with gold thread.

Lady Helen sat in Spindlestoneheugh  
Wi' silk below her breast; 10  
The best pearl in the queen's girdle  
Was lesser than her least.

Lady Helen sat in Spindlestoneheugh  
With silk upon her feet;  
The seams were sewn wi' cloth of scarlet 15  
To keep them frae the weat.

[“]O wha will keep the keys for me  
Until the lord be hame?  
Or wha will ca' his kye for me,  
To see gin ony be lame?” 20

She hadna bided a month but three  
With silk bands to her side,  
When word is come to Lady Helen  
To meet her father's ae new bride.

“Ye'll bring the owsen and the sheep to stall, 25

Ye'll bring the kye to stand;  
Ye'll set the first key in my girdle,  
The neist key at my hand."

"But gin he has wedded a witch woman  
To work sic teen on me, 30  
I'll come nae mair to Spindlestoneheugh  
Till green grow in a dry tree.["]

And she's done on her braw girdle,  
Between the sun and moon,  
And she's done on her kaims of gold, 35  
Her gold gown and her shoon.

She's tied her hair in three witch knots,  
I wot, abune her bonny een;  
And for her hair and her body,  
I wot she might have been a queen. 40

"I wish the sickle was in the rye,  
And the rye was ower my head;  
And aye the next rose I shall gather,  
I wish the white may be the red."

She's tane the keys intil her hands 45  
Between the red sun and the moon;  
The rain ran down upon the grass,  
And stained in her silk shoon.

She's tane the keys to her girdle-tie  
Between the warm sun and the weat; 50  
The rain that was between the grass and rye,  
Ran down upon her feet.

"O whatten a burd is yonder burd  
That shines about her head?"  
"It is but Helen my ae daughter 55

Has clad hersell wi' red[.]”

“O where gat she thae stones of price,  
The warst might serve a queen?”

“It is but for the summer season  
She's clad hersell wi' green[.]” 60

Lady Helen knelt upon her knees,  
She knelt upon her yellow hair;  
“Hae back your keys, my dear father,  
God give you weel to fare.”

Lady Helen knelt into the dust, 65  
She knelt upon the roadway stane;  
“And God you keep, madame, my mither,  
As I shall be your ain.”

Out then spak the new-come bride,  
I wot she spak wi' pain and care; 70  
“O some hae gold to weave, Helen,  
And some hae gold to wear.”

Out then spak the witch-mother,  
I wot she spak fu' little worth;  
“Look where my saddle sits, Helen, 75  
Ye'll stand against the saddle-girth.”

She's tane the red kaims frae her hair,  
The red shoon frae her feet;  
She's set her face to the saddle stirrup,  
That nane should hear her greet. 80

And aye she ran, and weel she ran  
Till her sides were waxen sair;  
And the sun that was upon the ways  
Had burnt her through her hair.

They hadna ridden a nile but three 85  
When she was fain to bide;  
For the blood was come upon her feet  
And the pain upon her side.

And whiles she ran, and whiles she grat,  
In the warm sun and the cold, 90  
Till they came to the bonny castle  
Was bigged upon with gold.

“O see ye not thae towers, Helen,  
Where ye gat meat and wine?  
It’s I maun ligg in the braw bride-chamber, 95  
And ye maun ligg wi’ swine.

“O see ye not thae halls, Helen,  
Where ye gat silk to wear?  
It’s I shall hae the gold gowns on,  
When your body is bare.” 100

“O ye’ll sit in the braw guest-chamber,  
And ye’ll drink white and red;  
But ye’ll gar them gie me the washing water,  
The meats and the broken bread?”

[“]Ye’ll get nae chine o’ the broken loaves, 105  
The white bread wi’ the brown;  
Ye’ll drink of the rain and the puddle water  
My maids shall cast ye down.”

“O ye’ll sit in the braw guest-chamber  
Wi’ the gowd braids on your hair; 110  
But ye’ll gie me a poor coat and a smock  
For my body to wear?

“O I shall ligg i’ the trodden straw,  
And ye in a gold bride-bed;

But ye'll gie me a claith to hap my feet, 115  
And a claith to hap my head?"

"Ye'll get no claith to hap you in,  
Ye'll get no coats of me;  
Ye'll get nae mair but a riven smock  
To wear on your body." 120

And she's ate of the foul swines meat  
With her saft lips and fine;  
She's put her mouth to the rank water,  
Was poured amang the swine.

Never ae word spak Lady Helen, 125  
Never ae word but twa;  
"O gin my mither had hands to help  
I wad be weel holpen awa'."

Never ae word spak Lady Helen,  
Never ae word but three: 130  
"O gin my mither had lips to kiss,  
Sae weel she wad kiss me!

"She wad kiss me on my ravelled hair,  
The foul cheek and the chin;  
She wad kiss me on the weary mouth, 135  
Where the rank water gaed in."

Out then came the witch mother:  
"What ails ye now to greet?  
Here's grass to hap ye dry, Helen,  
And straw to hap ye sweet." 140

The rain fell frae her feet and hands,  
Frae her lang hair and fine:  
"What ails ye at the baked meats, Helen,  
The brown wheat bread and the wine?"

She's turned her by the waist about, 145  
She's turned her by the knee;  
She's witched her body to a laidley worm,  
A laidley worm to be.

"The red fruit shall grow in green river water,  
The green grass in the wet sea, 150  
Ere ye shall come to a fair woman,  
A fair woman to be."

And she's garr'd bigg her seven swine-brows,  
She's made them wide and lang;  
She's tane the kail and the meal pocks 155  
That the foul worm might feed amang.

Aye she roupit and aye she croupit  
And aye she soupit the mair;  
And for the breath of her laidley mouth  
The sweet land stank fu' sair. 160

Word is come to Lady Helen's brother,  
In God's town where he lay,  
His father had gatten a braw new bride  
And his sister was stown away.

Word is come to Lord Richard, 165  
Where he was in God's land,  
There were nine men out of the north  
Would fain be to his hand.

"Whatten word is this, ye good sailors,  
This word ye hae to me? 170  
Gin it be a word of the good land,  
A dear word it maun be."

"O there is a worm in Spindlestoneheugh,

A laidley worm to see;  
It has the tongue of a maid-woman, 175  
And a worm's foul body.

“For nine mile out of Spindlestoneheugh  
Of grass and rye there is nae routh;  
There is sma' routh of the good red corn,  
For the breath of her rank mouth.” 180

“Whatten word is this, ye carlish caitives?  
For this word ye hae to me,  
There shall never meat come in my mouth  
Till I be put to sea.”

And he's garr'd bigg him a fu' fair ship, 185  
He's biggit it a' of the rowan tree;  
It was neither hasped wi' gowd nor airn.  
To haud it frae the sea.

It was neither hasped wi' gowd nor airn,  
Nor yet wi' siller wan; 190  
But a' the wood it was biggit wi'  
Was of the white rowan.

And they sailed lang, and they sailed sair  
And they drave ower to South;  
And a wind was in the ship's side, 195  
And a wind in the ship's mouth.

And when he came to Spindlestoneheugh,  
He's tane the vervein in his hand;  
“Now God have heed of the fair ship,  
For we must row to land.” 200

“Have pity of us, O Lord Richard,  
For we dare no further gang.”  
“Gin I may come by a goodly gallows,

The best of ye a' shall hang."

But when he saw the seven swine trows, 205  
He weened a sair thing to have seen;  
And when he saw the laidley worm  
The tears brast ower in his een.

["O' gin ye'll kiss my laidley mouth  
For the love of God's body, 210  
I winna do ye scaith, brother,  
Though I be a foul thing to see."

He's put his mouth to her laidley mouth,  
He's kissed her once and twice;  
"I had liever lose God's dear body 215  
Than kiss this foul worm thrice."

He's put his mouth to her laidley mouth,  
He's kissed her kisses three;  
The flesh fell frae her laidley mouth  
And frae her rank body; 220  
And it was but his sister Helen  
Stood at Lord Richard's knee.

She was clad all in fair red samite,  
Her mouth was red and fair;  
There was nae burd in the good land 225  
That had such yellow hair.

He's tane him to the witch mother  
That sat by her bairn's bed;  
The gold was gone in her grey hair,  
Her face was heavy and red. 230

"O wae be wi' you, ye ill woman,  
And the young bairn at your knee;  
There's never a bairn shall die abed

That comes of your body.”

“Now God you save, my fair brother,  
For his dear body that was dead;  
Now God you save and maiden Mary  
That kept me of her maidenhead.[”]

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*1909*

(From *Ballads of the English Border*. Ed. with Introduction,  
Glossary and Notes by William A. MacInnes. London:  
William Heinemann, 1925)