

# Sister Helen

By Dante Gabriel Rossetti

“Why did you melt your waxen man,  
Sister Helen?

To-day is the third since you began.”

“The time was long, yet the time ran,  
Little brother.”

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Three days to-day, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“But if you have done your work aright,  
Sister Helen,

You’ll let me play, for you said I might.”

“Be very still in your play to-night,  
Little brother.”

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Third night, to-night, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“You said it must melt ere vesper-bell,  
Sister Helen;

If now it be molten, all is well.”

“Even so,—nay, peace! you cannot tell,  
Little brother.”

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
O what is this, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“Oh the waxen knave was plump to-day,  
Sister Helen;

How like dead folk he has dropped away

“Nay now, of the dead what can you say,  
Little brother?”

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What of the dead, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“See, see, the sunken pile of wood,  
Sister Helen,

Shines through the thinned wax red as blood

“Nay now, when looked you yet on blood,  
Little brother?”

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
How pale she is, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Now close your eyes, for they’re sick and sore,  
Sister Helen,  
And I’ll play without the gallery door.”  
“Aye, let me rest,—I’ll lie on the floor,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What rest to-night, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“Here high up in the balcony,  
Sister Helen,  
The moon flies face to face with me.  
“Aye, look and say whatever you see,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What sight to-night, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“Outside it’s merry in the wind’s wake,  
Sister Helen;  
In the shaken trees the chill stars shake.”  
“Hush, heard you a horse-tread as you spake,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What sound to-night between Hell and Heaven?)*

“I hear a horse-tread, and I see,  
Sister Helen,  
Three horsemen that ride terribly.”  
“Little brother, whence come the three,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Whence should they come, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“They come by the hill-verge from Boyne Bar,  
Sister Helen,  
And one drays nigh, but two are afar.”  
“Look, look, do you know them who they are,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Who should they be, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“Oh, it’s Keith of Eastholm rides so fast,  
Sister Helen,  
For I know the white mane on the blast.”  
“The hour has come, has come at last,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Her hour at last, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“He has made a sign and called Halloo!  
Sister Helen,  
And he says that he would speak with you.”  
“Oh tell him I fear the frozen dew,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Why laughs she thus, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“The wind is loud, but I hear him cry,  
Sister Helen,  
That Keith of Ewern’s like to die.”  
“And he and thou, and thou and I,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
And they and we, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Three days ago, on his marriage-morn,  
Sister Helen,  
He sickened, and lies since then forlorn.”  
“For bridegroom’s side is the bride a thorn,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Cold bridal cheer, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Three days and nights he has lain abed,  
Sister Helen,  
And he prays in torment to be dead.”  
“The thing may chance, if he have prayed,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
If ye have prayed, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“But he has not ceased to cry to-day,  
Sister Helen,  
That you should take your curse away.  
“My prayer was heard,—he need but pray,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Shall God not hear, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“But he says, till you take back your ban,  
Sister Helen,  
His soul would pass, yet never can.”  
“Nay then, shall I slay a living man,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
A living soul, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“But he calls for ever on your name,  
Sister Helen,  
And says that he melts before a flame.”  
“My heart for his pleasure fared the same,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Fire at the heart, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Here’s Keith of Westholm riding fast,  
Sister Helen,  
For I know the white plume on the blast.”  
“The hour, the sweet hour I forecast,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Is the hour sweet, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“He stops to speak, and he stills his horse,  
Sister Helen;  
But his words are drowned in the wind’s course.”  
“Nay hear, nay hear, you must hear perforce,  
Little brother  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What word between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Oh he says that Keith of Ewern’s cry,  
Sister Helen,  
Is ever to see you ere he die.”  
“In all that his soul sees, there am I,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
The soul’s one sight between Hell and Heaven!)*

“He sends a ring and a broken coin,  
Sister Helen,  
And bids you mind the banks of Boyne.”  
“What else he broke will he ever join,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
No, never joined, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“He yields you these and craves full fain,  
Sister Helen,  
You pardon him in his mortal pain.”  
“What else he took will he give again, Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Not twice to give, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“He calls your name in an agony,  
Sister Helen,  
That even dead Love must weep to see.  
“Hate, born of Love, is blind as he,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Love turned to hate, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Oh, it’s Keith of Keith now that rides fast,  
Sister Helen,  
For I know the white hair on the blast.”  
“The short, short hour will soon be past,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Will soon be past, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“He looks at me and he tries to speak,  
Sister Helen,  
But oh! his voice is sad and weak  
“What here should the mighty Baron seek,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Is this the end, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“Oh his son still cries, if you forgive,  
Sister Helen,  
The body dies but the soul shall live.”  
“Fire shall forgive me as I forgive,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
As she forgives, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Oh he prays you, as his heart would rive,  
Sister Helen,  
To save his dear son’s soul alive.”  
“Fire cannot slay it, it shall thrive,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Alas, alas, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“He cries to you, kneeling in the road,  
Sister Helen,  
To go with him for the love of God!”  
“The way is long to his son’s abode,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
The way is long, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“A lady’s here, by a dark steed brought,  
Sister Helen,  
So darkly clad, I saw her not.”  
“See her now or never see aught,  
Little brother  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What more to see, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“Her hood falls back, and the moon shines fair,  
Sister Helen,  
On the Lady of Ewern’s golden hair.”  
“Blest hour of my power and her despair,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Hour blest and bann’d, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Pale, pale her cheeks, that in pride did glow,  
Sister Helen,  
Neath the bridal-wreath three days ago.  
“One morn for pride and three days for woe,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Three days, three nights, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Her clasped hands stretch from her bending head,  
Sister Helen;  
With the loud wind’s wail her sobs are wed.”  
“What wedding-strains hath her bridal-bed Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What strain but death’s, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“She may not speak, she sinks in a swoon,  
Sister Helen,  
She lifts her lips and gasps on the moon.”  
“Oh! might I but hear her soul’s blithe tune,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Her woe’s dumb cry, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“They’ve caught her to Westholm’s saddle-bow,  
Sister Helen,  
And her moonlit hair gleams white in its flow.”  
“Let it turn whiter than winter snow,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Woe-withered gold, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“O Sister Helen, you heard the bell,  
Sister Helen,  
More loud than the vesper-chime it fell.”  
“No vesper-chime, but a dying knell,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
His dying knell, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Alas! but I fear the heavy sound,  
Sister Helen;  
Is it in the sky or in the ground?”  
“Say, have they turned their horses round,  
Little brother?”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
What would she more, between Hell and Heaven?)*

“They have raised the old man from his knee,  
Sister Helen,  
And they ride in silence hastily.”  
“More fast the naked soul doth flee,  
Little brother  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
The naked soul, between hell and Heaven!)*

“Flank to flank are the three steeds gone,  
Sister Helen,  
But the lady’s dark steed goes alone.”  
“And lonely her bridgroom’s soul hath flown,  
Little brother.”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
The lonely ghost, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Oh the wind is sad in the iron chill,  
Sister Helen,  
And weary sad they look by the hill.”  
“But Keith of Ewern’s sadder still,  
Little brother!”  
*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Most sad of all, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“See, see, the wax has dropped from its place,  
Sister Helen!  
And the flames are winning up apace!”  
“Yet here they burn but for a space,  
Little brother

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Here for a space, between Hell and Heaven!)*

“Ah! what white thing at the door has cross’d,  
Sister Helen?

Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?”

“A soul that’s lost as mine is lost,  
Little brother!”

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)*