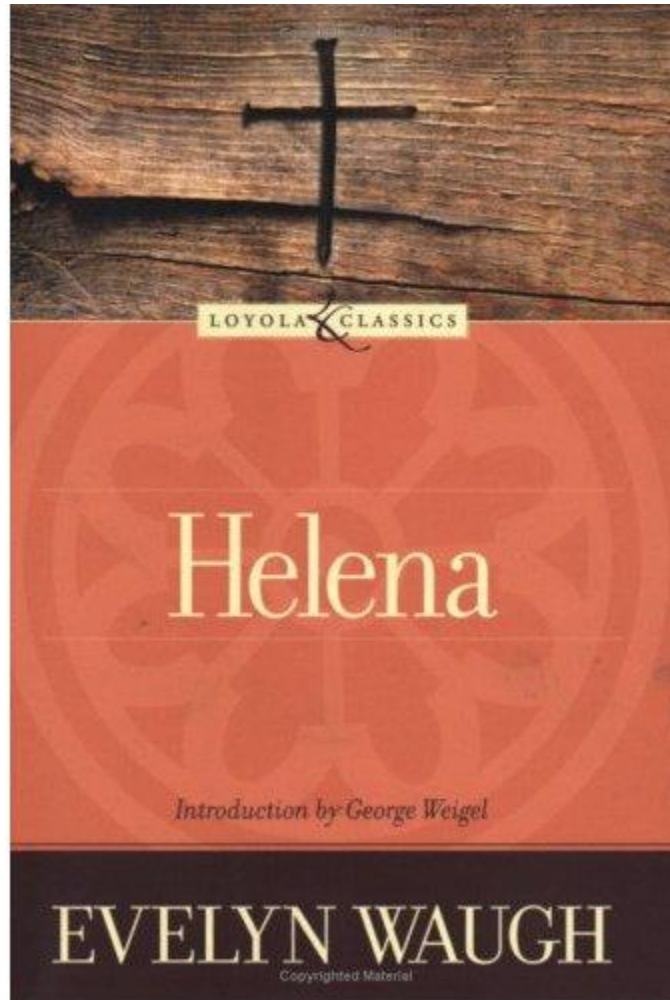


## A Summary of *Helena* by Evelyn Waugh



## A Summary of *Helena* by Evelyn Waugh

London: Chapman and Hall, 1950

Summary by Trena Pilegaard, Written Exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.

[You can purchase the full text at Amazon.com](#)

## About the Author

Evelyn Waugh was born in 1903 in London, England. Waugh attended Lancing Public School and then gained a scholarship to Oxford. Despite his academic brilliance, Waugh left Oxford before he obtained his degree and began to establish himself as a writer.

In 1930, Waugh became a Roman Catholic. In his work there is a marked difference between his pre and post conversion work. Probably his most famous post conversion work is *Brideshead Revisited*. *Helena*, published in 1950, was also one of the many books that Waugh wrote after his conversion

## General Overview

Young Helena is a princess in the court of her British father when conquering Romans come for a visit. The leader of the group, the young Constantius, finds himself falling in love with the beautiful Helena. After securing permission from her father, Constantius marries Helena and takes her far away from her homeland.

Once she has left Britain, Helena realizes the importance of her new husband. It is believed that Constantius will succeed the Emperor when it is time. Helena is perplexed by her new position and the way people treat her. Soon she is expecting and gives birth to Constantine.

Eventually, though it takes a much longer time than Constantius imagined, the throne is given to Constantius. But for Constantius, the path to glory includes divorcing Helena and taking a new, more politically appealing, wife.

As the years pass, Constantine grows up and eventually leaves Helena. Constantius dies and Constantine is named Emperor. Helena is given the title Empress Dowager. Later she converts to Christianity.

Sadly, Helena watches her son take the same road as his father, sacrificing everything for power and glory. Like his father, Constantine divorces his first wife in order to have a politically correct wife while he is on the throne. Helena takes Constantine's cast off wife into her home and cares for her grandson, Crispus.

Constantine continues in his downward spiral until he even orders to have his own son killed at the persuasion of his new wife, Fausta. The court of Constantine is corrupt beyond imagining and soon Constantine has Fausta killed too.

After the death of Crispus, Helena leaves Rome to journey to Jerusalem in order to find the true cross. Her search is long and often disheartening. One night she has a dream that tells her exactly where the cross is buried. After excavating the spot where the dream told her to dig, Helena finds the three crosses that stood on Calvary on Good Friday, including the Cross on which our Lord died. With her search complete, Helena begins the triumphant journey homeward and slowly fades from history.

## Chapter One: Court Memoir

In 273 AD., the young, redheaded, princess Helena sits daydreaming as her tutor, Marcias, reads her history lesson. Helena is the daughter of Coel, the Lord of Britain. Marcias is reading the *Iliad*, and Helena comments that Priam was a distant relative of her family. Marcias continues to read for a while and then Helena questions him. Were the walls of Troy higher than the walls of her family's castle? Had anyone ever dug up Troy? Helena says that someday she is going to go to Troy and dig it up.

Helena's questioning continues for some time. It is revealed that Marcias is not only Helena's tutor, but a slave of the household. When Helena has finished her education, he will be released. Helena continues chattering and asking questions. She eventually mentions the arrival of a new officer from Gaul, who she speculates is on a secret mission.

A General is in the bath with Constantius. They speak of the recent disgraceful treatment of the Emperor Valerian by the Persians. Constantius questions the General about the state of the army in Persia and the state of the army there. As the General and Constantius move through the bath, the General speculates to himself that Constantius is up to something.

Both Constantius and the General are going to a party at Coel's house that night. Constantius asks the General what Coel is like and if he is into politics. Here the General begins to ask Constantius questions. The General does not believe that Constantius is a part of Tetricus staff, he points out that what he has said does not match up with his position as a staff member.

Marcus is still reading Helena the story of Troy, and Aphrodite has just arranged the meeting between Paris and Helen. Helena finds the situation hilarious, especially since Menelaus is ignorant of everything that is going on. Marcus mentions Longinus, the historian, who is a personal favorite with the tutor Marcus, for Helena Longinus is both an object of fun and awe.

That evening is the banquet that Helena's father Coel is hosting. The ladies do not eat with the men, but dine by themselves in a separate room. After they have eaten, they prepare themselves for the entertainment that is to follow dinner. Helena dresses herself in fine clothes from the orient and numerous jewels.

Helena processes in with the women to where the men are reclining, stiff chairs have been set up for them. The concert begins. Coel explains to Constantius that the song that is playing is a lament for the ancestors of Coel's family. The lament is long and tedious, but Coel takes pride in the story of his ancestors.

Helena, sitting on her stiff chair, distracts herself by day dreaming about horseback riding. It is a habit she has had since she was a girl. As she sits with the women, Constantius sees her, and falls in love with her.

## **Chapter Two: Fair Helen Forfeit**

The next morning Constantius finds Helena in the stalls looking at the horses. She immediately points out that the horses are not Gallic as the stable master would like her to believe, but that they were fathered by a certain horse from the south. Constantius covers by saying that they changed horses during their trip. Constantius asks Helena what she is doing in the stables, and Helena explains that she likes to see the new horses that come in. Then Constantius introduces himself.

Later, Constantius asks Coel for Helena's hand in marriage. Coel does not like Constantius, he finds him sly. But Constantius says he has reasons for remaining inconspicuous. He will not tell Coel about his family, but assures him that Coel would not be making an unworthy alliance. Finally, Constantius tells Coel that he is of the Imperial Family, and that he is related to two Emperors. Coel is still not satisfied. He asks where Constantius lives. Constantius replies that he is a soldier and does not have any property. Coel says that he will talk to Helena about the marriage and that the decision will be entirely up to her.

Coel sends for Helena and tells her that Constantius has asked for her hand in marriage. Helena says that she wants to marry Constantius. Coel is shocked; he has never thought that Helena might want to marry Constantius. Coel tells Helena that she will have to leave Britain, but Helena is excited to see new places.

Constantius is anxious to leave, and the wedding is celebrated as soon as possible. There is a great feast and when evening comes, Constantius carries Helena over the threshold of his lodgings.

The next morning Helena goes hunting for the last time in her native country. That night she asks her father to release Marcias, since now it can be assumed that her education is finished. Coel is reluctant to free the slave, so Helena asks to have Marcias as a present, a request that Coel grants.

### **Chapter Three: None But My Foe to Be My Guide**

Helena and Constantius sail to Boulogne. When they arrive in the harbor, Constantius tells Helena that she must not gossip with people about where she is from, or where Constantius has been. For some reason that is not revealed to Helena, Constantius does not want anyone to know that he has been to Britain. Constantius also tells Helena that she is going to Nish, as he has other business to attend to but he will meet her there later.

The party that is going to Nish travels in haste. Constantius tells Helena that he will go with them as far as Ratisbon. As Helena is riding with Constantius, they come to the wall of the city. Constantius tells Helena that although the wall is wood now, it will be made of stone someday. Helena asks if there will always be a wall. She asks if someday the city, such as Rome, will break out of the wall and cover the world. Constantius tells Helena that she has been reading too much Virgil. Helena agrees that it seems silly that a city could possibly incorporate everyone, even barbarians.

When they reach Ratisbon, Helena discovers that it is the biggest city she has ever seen. There the Governor's wife takes Helena under her wing and dresses her in the fashions of the day. All are curious as to where Constantius' wife is from.

Constantius leaves Helena in Ratisbon as he goes on business. While she is in Ratisbon, Helena finds that the ladies, unlike the women of Britain, do not go outdoors much. When they do go outside, it is in a covered litter. Helena also finds that there are two main groups of women in Ratisbon, those obsessed with passion and those obsessed with religion. Helena asks if there is any truth in the religion and the Governor's wife replies that she never questions it.

Helena confides to the Governor's wife that she is with child. The Governor's wife hopes that it is a boy, for no doubt he will be someone of importance someday. The Governor's wife also tells Helena not to tie herself up in friendships she might have to drop. Helena is confused and the Governor's wife explains that Constantius is on the way to becoming Emperor, and he is already a favorite of Divine Aurelian. For Helena, this explains the reaction she received from ladies every time she entered into a room.

As Helena's pregnancy progresses, she only wishes for the return of Constantius. Constantius returned in the summer and the couple enjoyed their time together. Helena questions Constantius about becoming Emperor. Constantius responds that the country is becoming too big to be ruled by just one man, and that he might soon have a position of power. Helena says that she does not want to be Empress.

Helena and Constantius begin to travel by barge to Nish, Constantius' homeland. When they arrive he shows her all around. But Helena is not happy in Nish, she does not understand Latin very well, and she is homesick for her country.

### **Chapter Four: The Career Open to Talent**

That winter, news comes from the east about a victory. Helena learns that the philosopher Longinus has been killed. Constantius is invited by Divine Aurelian to attend the triumph in Rome. Helena wishes that she can go to, but considering her condition, it is impossible.

The baby was born in the beginning of the year; Constantius had left orders to name the child Constantine if it was a boy. Helena discovers that in Nish women nursed their babies themselves, instead of hiring a wet-nurse. Helena enjoyed loving and caring for her baby.

When Constantius returns in the spring, Helena realizes that he did not love her anymore. However, she hides her emotions. Constantius tells Helena of all the pomp and circumstance of the triumph and Rome. He describes the parties and the people he met there.

Three years later, Constantius and Helena move with Constantine to Dalmatia. Helena is excited about the move. She also enjoyed the move, riding on a horse with little Constantine in front of her. The family settled in the Government House and there Constantius began to govern his province. Constantine is old enough now for a tutor, so Constantius acquires a mistress, and Helena gains a friend. The woman who Helena befriends is a widow from Rome and patron of the arts, her name is Clapurnia.

The empire is at peace for a while and then Aurelian dies. It was expected that Constantius will ascend the throne, but two other men are put before him. Constantius retreats to his villa by the sea and will see no one. When he emerges, both contenders for the empire are dead and Diocletian is on the throne.

Constantine continues to grow up, asking questions all the time. He tells his mother that he wants to be emperor someday. One day, Constantine found the body of his father's mistress floating in the sea, and he told his mother.

Diocletian decides to divide the government in two and gave half to the rule of Constantius. Constantius goes to Rome for the ceremonies and returns dressed in purple. Helena asks when they will be moving to Rome and Constantius tells her that she is not going to Rome. While he was there he had obtained a divorce and married another woman. Helena asks to be sent back to Britain, but Constantius says it was out of the question. In the meantime, Constantine will be sent for further schooling in Nicomedia, but Helena may not go with him. Helena and Constantius sit and watch the fires that are being lit in celebration of Constantius' elevation.

## **Chapter Five: The Post of Honor is a Private Station**

After Constantius divorced her, Helena lives alone for thirteen years. Constantius ruled in Gaul and along with the governing of Maximan and Diocletian, the empire grew. Diocletian came to build a house not far from Helena's home. She and Calpurnia comment on the house and consider it to be an eyesore. Calpurnia suggests that they travel to Italy, but Helena is content to stay. When she was young, she wanted to go to Rome and to Troy, but now she is content to stay in one spot.

Calpurnia mentions that Diocletian and Maximan are retiring; Constantius will become emperor. Helena hopes that this change will not affect her or Constantine. Constantine has married a woman named Minervina and had a son named Crispus.

One night, Constantine arrives at the home of his mother after a very long absence. With him are his wife and his son, two people Helena has never seen. Constantine explains that they were in a terrible hurry, and that they couldn't stay long. Helena sees to the comfort of Minervina, who is nearly unconscious with exhaustion. Helena also talks to her young grandson, Crispus, who explains that they are fleeing a bad emperor and are trying to get to the good emperor, Constantius.

Constantine tells his mother that she must leave and come with him to Constantius' territory. He explains that things are falling apart and that for her safety she must leave. Constantine also complains of the Christians in Rome, as he thinks that they are the biggest problem of the whole empire.

## Chapter Six: Ancient Regime

Helena and her daughter-in-law are living in Treves. Constantius has died and Constantine is on the throne. Helena is now called the Empress Dowager and Constantine has divorced his wife for a new wife named Fausta. The area in which Helena had been settled in by Constantine was pleasant to her; it reminded her of her homeland. Minervina does not enjoy the area as much as Helena did; she is used to the Far East.

Crispus is being tutored by a man named Lactantius. Lactantius is a Christian from Nicomedia that has just barely missed the persecutions there. Treves seemed to be a place of refuge for Christians. Helena has generously provided the refugee Christians with homes, even though she is not Christian herself.

Helena does not really like Minervina, but put up with her for the sake of young Crispus. Minervina belongs to a Gnostic cult in Treves. Minervina wants to have a Gnostic speaker come and stay with her and Helena, but Helena put her foot down refuses to host the man. However, Helena agrees to go to the talk. At the talk, Helena is surprised to find that the speaker is none other than Marcias, her old tutor from Britain.

Marcias is pleased to see Helena, and also pleased that a person of such high distinction has come to hear him speak. After the talk, Helena asks him to give particulars about what he spoke about. But Marcias is unable to answer even the most simple of Helena's questions.

Helena left the talk, but Minervina stays behind to talk with the others gathered there. At home, Helena questions Lactantius about his Christian religion. Helena is pleased that Lactantius is able to give her basic, concrete answers to her questions, such as who founded the Christian religion, when it was founded, and where. Lactantius explains that many of the holy places in Jerusalem are kept secret, to prevent them from being desecrated by people who hated the Christians.

## Chapter Seven: The Second Spring

Four more years have passed. Minervina has married again and Crispus has been summoned to his father's headquarters. Constantine plans to march on Rome. The edit of Milan is passed and Christians finally could freely practice their religion.

Helena is curious as to why Constantine passed the edit. Lactantius explains that Constantine has put himself under the protection of Christ. However, Lactantius also says that Constantine is not Christian yet.

Helena wants to know if there really was a cross in the sky. She wants to know if her son really did see a cross in the sky and she wonders how it got there. Lactantius says that he cannot properly answer her questions, but now that the edict has been passed there will be people coming who can.

Constantine grew in power, and grew farther away from his mother. Crispus now corresponds with his grandmother the way his father used to do when he was young. Helena has become Christian, and she prepares to settle down for the rest of her life. When she is seventy years old, Constantine invites her to Rome for his jubilee. Then, and only then, is Helena finally convinced to go to Rome.

## Chapter Eight: Constantine's Great Treat

No one, not even Constantine, expected Helena to come to Rome. There was some trouble finding a place for her to stay, for all the other palaces were filled to the brim. But finally she settles in the Sessorian Palace.

No one came to visit Helena for a while. Finally the Empress Fausta came to call upon Helena. Fausta wants to see her husband's mother for herself. Constantine's marriage to Fausta was strictly a political one; Constantine had wanted to establish connections with Fausta's father and brother. As a person, Fausta is known for her dissolute character. Immediately Helena dislikes the Empress Fausta.

Fausta's conversation with Helena only proved how shallow Fausta's views are. Fausta is a Christian only because it is a novelty. From Fausta, Helena discovers that Constantine has taken the name Gracchus and that they are calling her grandson by the name of Tarquin instead of Crispus. Both these developments displease the Dowager Empress. Fausta invites Helena to the palace, but she tells her that she does not know who will be there to receive her. Apparently Constantine has not been seeing anyone for some time. After Fausta leaves, Helena finds a piece of paper in her room accusing Fausta of adultery; the paper is anonymous.

Fausta returns the next day bringing the Bishop of Nicomedia with her. Helena does not like the Bishop, she finds him very liberal in his views. Moreover, throughout the whole conversation they only touch on theology once. The Bishop plainly states his disapproval of the Council of Nicaea. Later that night Helena finds another note accusing the bishop of Arianism.

The next day Constantia comes to visit Helena with her son Licinianus. Helena is disturbed by the boy Licinianus. He seems to be perpetually nervous. Constantia also seem to be always on her guard. Even when she finds that Helena's servants are trustworthy she still speaks with reserve. Helena tells Constantia to tell Crispus to come and visit her. Constantia agrees to give the message to 'Tarquin.' Another anonymous note is found that night accusing Licinianus of conspiracy.

Crispus finally comes to visit Helena, but he too seems very nervous. Helena comments on his nervousness and Crispus explains that for some reason he has found disfavor at court. Fausta seems to be against him for some reason. He has been trying to rejoin the army but he has never had any replies. Helena sympathizes with her grandson and says she will demand an audience with her son.

Helena finally sees her son for the first time in twenty years. However, she is displeased with Constantine's appearance. He is dressed in costly finery with a green wig on his head. There are also guards everywhere. Helena had wants to talk to her son in private, but it did not look like that was an option. Constantine also seems to be unaware that Helena had been in Rome already for three weeks. Before Helena can even talk to her son, he begins to do business with the sculptors that are working on his triumphal arch. Helena is pushed to the side as he debates with the men. When the men leave, Helen thinks that she will finally be able to talk to Constantine about Crispus, but Constantine says it is time for prayer. Constantine leads the court in some kind of office of prayer and then gives a short sermon. Then he leaves with Fausta, leaving his mother behind.

Constantine goes with Fausta to test a new witch that they have found. They are looking for someone who has the gift of prophecy. A girl is brought in and put into a trance. She says that the emperor is in danger and then utters something that sounds like the name Crispus.

Later Fausta tries to get Constantine to do away with a list of people. Constantine refuses to sign the list. Fausta says that Crispus and Licinianus must be eliminated, and finally Constantine agrees to send them to Pola. Constantine goes into seclusion again and the only way to reach him is through Fausta. Licinianus and Crispus are sent away and "die" of the plague. When Constantine heard the death of his son, he immediately regrets what he had done. Fausta tries to convince him that it was not murder, but that Crispus was sent away for treason. Constantine asks if his mother has been to visit and Fausta says she has not, even though Helena has been at the door of the palace every day demanding to see the Emperor.

While Constantine is talking with Fausta, Fausta suggests that Helena might have been a part of the same "plot" that Crispus was. For the first time, Constantine realizes what Fausta is doing and decides that Fausta

has gone too far. Constantine discovers that Fausta lied to him about his mother never coming to the palace. He has the witches that Fausta hired destroyed. Then he has Fausta killed in her bath.

## Chapter Nine: Recessional

Helena is talking to Constantine about the state of Rome and himself. Helena compares him to Nero throwing Constantine into a deluge of reasons why he is not like Nero, which only seem to make him more like the odious character. Helena says that Constantine needs grace, and Constantine objects to the conversation returning again to the subject of baptism. Constantine says that he does not want to be baptized while there is still the chance he will sin again. He wants to be baptized just before he dies in order to avoid all the work that comes with being a Christian.

Constantine shows Helena the sign that he conquered Rome under. It is a big beautiful *chi ro*, so elaborate in fact that it is impossible that this is the sign that Constantine had with him when he conquered the city. Helena is not impressed. In frustration, Constantine tells Pope Sylvester that he is going to build his own Christian city, and that Pope Sylvester can have Rome. The new city he plans to build will be in the east, centered around two great churches named Wisdom and Peace.

Helena did not like Constantine's idea for a city, and she stayed behind in Rome after Constantine left. Helena and Pope Sylvester sit and talk in the Lateran palace. While they are talking about the state of Rome and the Church, Helena suddenly asks where the Cross of Jesus Christ is kept. Pope Sylvester says that he has no idea. Helena immediately decides to go and find the cross of Jesus Christ.

## Chapter Ten: The Innocence of Bishop Marcarius

Helena began her search for the Holy Cross in 326. Along the way she used her wealth lavishly to help those less fortunate and to build churches to house other relics she finds during her search.

In the Holy Land, there is a Bishop by the name of Marcarius that has discovered the Holy Sepulcher. The Roman Prefect of the place blames the poor bishop for the coming of the Empress Helena. The Prefect wonders out loud how they are going to prepare for her coming and keep her safe.

Marcarius had always felt that he was unworthy of the location of his bishopric. He lived in the very land where Jesus and Mary were born lived and died. When Marcarius told Constantine of the treasures that lay in the Holy Land, especially the Holy Sepulcher, Constantine was eager to fund the excavation of the Holy Sepulcher.

The excavations began and the Holy Sepulcher turned out to be just where Marcarius thought it would be. After the excavations were complete, the location had become a peaceful place on a hill. But when Constantine found out that the Sepulcher had been discovered, he gave orders to have it totally enclosed in a grand church. No expense was to be spared. Marcarius was saddened that this place of retreat would be turned into a huge church.

The construction began and soon the hill where the Sepulcher was located became a huge church. The final product was deemed to be even grander than the Lateran.

## Chapter Eleven: Epiphany

The Prefect need not have ever feared the coming of Helena. When she arrived, it was not fine delicacies or treatment that she wanted, but the true Cross. What was originally Pilate's Praetorium was redecorated to be



the Empresses' living quarters. However, when Helena discovers that the steps that lead inside had been walked upon by Jesus Christ, she kneels down and goes the rest of the way on her knees. Once she had reached the top, she ordered that the steps be taken apart, boxed up and sent to Pope Sylvester in Rome.

After moving the steps, Helena goes to stay with the nuns of Mount Zion, participating in their daily life. Other relics continued to make their way to Helena as gifts, but the one relic that she sought still eluded her. She began talking to anyone who would know anything about the Cross.

On the feast of the Epiphany, Helena goes to Bethlehem, since she had been too ill to go there for Christmas. There at the birthplace of Jesus Christ, Helena prays for herself, for the conversion of her son, and for all those that she had known, especially for those who were not Christian.

## **Chapter Twelve: Ellen's Invention**

Lent has come and Helena still had not found the true Cross. Since all else had failed, she begins fasting in order to find the Cross more quickly. Good Friday comes and the cross still had not been found. Due to the strain of the fasting, Helena did not look very well, and that night the nuns gave her some opium to help her sleep.

While Helena sleeps she has an astounding dream. She dreams with perfect clarity that she has met a man who had lived while Jesus Christ was alive. Jesus had stumbled in front of the man's shop while He was carrying His cross. The man had shooed Jesus along, but in so many words Jesus told the man he would not see death until His second coming.

Helena asked the man if he knew where the cross was, he replied that he did. Helena offered him money to tell her where the cross was, but the man said he would show her the spot for free. He took her where an old well had once been. He said the crosses were at the bottom of the well and that the well had been filled up. He told her to dig until she came to the steps.

When Helena woke up on Holy Saturday, she went straight to the spot that the man had shown her in her dream. Helena ordered for excavations to begin immediately.

The men dug and found the stairs that the man from Helena's dream had talked about. Helena established herself at the excavations and would not move until the Cross had been found.

The well is found, but it is empty. However, there appears to be a sort of cellar door, Helena orders that it be opened and that the Cross or even crosses be taken out. Just as she said, there is not one cross, but three. There is also the sign that hung above Jesus' head, four nails, and a foot rest. The crosses are disassembled, but well preserved. The sign is attached to one of the crosses, designating it as a part of the true Cross, but it was uncertain as to which crossbeam goes with it.

Helena orders that the crossbeams be taken to the room of a dying woman. The beam that cures the woman will be the true Cross. When touched to the dying woman, the first two do nothing, but when the third beam touched the woman, she totally recovered.

Although now it was clear as to which cross was the true Cross, there did not appear to be a way to distinguish between the cross of the good thief and the cross of the bad thief. Helena solved the problem by having the two crosses divided equally and making two crosses of the combined wood.

Now that her task is complete, Helena begins her homeward journey, dispensing her relics as she saw fit. She visits her son and his new city on her way back to Italy. Constantine is preoccupied with a huge statue of

himself. She gave the nails to Constantine, who in an attempt to show them honor, has them adorn his statue, himself and his horse.

Helena made out her will, telling where all the things she had collected in her travels should go when she died. She dies in 328 and her body is sent back to Rome. There it is buried in the mausoleum that had been built for Constantine. Later her body is moved to the church of Ara Coeli by Urban VIII, where her bones are finally left in peace.