

JUDITH

[Unfortunately only the closing sections of this poem have survived. It is a work of remarkable power and beauty. The exultation with which the poet describes the overthrow of Holofernes and his host may have been inspired by the struggle of the English against the Danes.]

... She did not lose faith in His gifts on this far-spreading earth; then truly she found protection there in the famous Prince when she most needed the favour of the highest Judge, that He, the Lord of creation, should guard her against the greatest danger. The glorious Father in heaven bestowed that boon on her because she never failed in firm faith in the Almighty. Then Holofernes, as I heard, eagerly sent forth a bidding to wine, and dressed up dainties wondrously sumptuous. The prince of men bade all the eldest thanes come; the shield-bearing warriors attended in great haste; the chiefs of the people came to the mighty leader. It was on the fourth day that Judith, wise in thought, a woman of fairy beauty, first sought him.

X

Then they went to sit down at the banquet, exulting to carousal, all his companions in evil, bold corslet warriors. Often down the benches there deep bowls were borne, brimming beakers, too, and goblets for the guests. Daring shield-warriors, doomed to death, laid hold on them, though the leader, the dread master of men, had no thought of his fate. Then Holofernes, gold-friend of men, grew merry with the pouring out of wine; he laughed and called aloud, clamoured and made outcries, so that the children of men could hear from afar how he of stern mood stormed and shouted; proud and fevered by mead, he often urged the guests on the benches to bear themselves bravely. Thus the wicked one, the stern giver of treasure, drenched his officers all day in wine, till they lay swooning; he vanquished all his veterans with drink as if they were stricken by death, void of all virtue. Thus did the prince

of men order the guests to be plied until the dark night drew near the children of men.

Then, steeped in malice, he ordered the blessed maid to be brought with speed, laden with rings, adorned with circlets, to his bed. Quickly, the retainers did as their prince, the chief of corslet warriors, bade. Straightway they stepped to the guest-house where they found wise Judith; and then the shield-warriors promptly led the noble maid to the lofty pavilion, where the mighty man was ever wont to rest at night, Holofernes abhorred by the Saviour. There was a fair curtain, all golden, hung round the leader's couch, so that the evil man, the prince of warriors, could look through on each of the sons of men who entered there, and no man on him, unless the proud man bade one of his mighty warriors draw nearer him to hold council. Quickly then they brought the wise woman to the couch; then, troubled in mind, the men went to proclaim to their lord that the holy virgin had been led to his pavilion.

Then the renowned ruler of cities grew jubilant in his heart; he thought to stain the radiant woman with pollution and foulness. The glorious Judge, the Prince of majesty, was not minded to let that come to pass, but He, the Lord, the Master of warriors, kept him from that thing. Then the fiendish wanton with evil intent went to seek his bed with a band of followers, where forthwith in one night he was to lose his life. Then the unsparring sovereign of men had reached on earth his violent death, such a one as he had deserved while he dwelt in this world under the canopy of the clouds. Thus, fuddled with wine, the chieftain fell in the midst of his couch, as if he had no wits in his mind; the warriors passed out of the chamber with utmost haste, men sated with wine, who had brought the traitor, the hateful tyrant, to his bed for the last time.

Then did the Saviour's glorious servant ponder deeply how she might most easily spoil the monster of life, before he awoke with foul lust. Then the Creator's handmaiden, with curling tresses, grasped a sharp sword hardened in the storms of battle, and with her right hand drew it from the scabbard. Then she began to call upon the name of the Lord of heaven, the Saviour of all who dwell upon earth, and she spoke these words:

'I pray to Thee, God of creation, Spirit of comfort, Son all powerful, Glory of the Trinity, for Thy mercy in my need. Now is my heart greatly kindled and mournful my mood, sorely stirred with sorrows; give me, O Lord of heaven, victory and true faith, that with this sword I may cut down this dealer of

320
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sudden death; grant me my salvation, O stern Prince of men; never had I greater need of Thy mercy. Avenge now, O Lord of might, noble Giver of glory, what angers my mind, kindles my heart.

Then the highest Judge straightway inspired her with courage, as He does all men here who seek His aid in a right mind and true faith. Then her heart grew large; hope was renewed in the holy maid. Then she grasped the unbeliever hard by his hair; with her hands she drew him towards her to his shame, and with cunning laid the malicious one down, the hateful man, as she best could contrive to do with the caiff. Then the maiden with curling tresses struck the hostile foe with gleaming sword, so that she cut his neck half through; and, drunken and stricken, he lay in a swoon. He was not yet dead, wholly lifeless; the undaunted woman once again fiercely smote the heathen hound, so that his head rolled forth on the floor. The foul carcass lay dead behind; the spirit departed elsewhere under the deep cliff, and there it was humbled, bound for ever in torment, surrounded with serpents, fettered with agonies, held fast in hell-fire after death. Nor need he hope, engulfed in gloom, that he may leave that hall of serpents, but there he must dwell for ever without end in that dark home, empty of joy.

XI

Judith then had won illustrious fame in fight, as God granted unto her, the Prince of heaven, who gave her victory. Then the wise maiden swiftly brought the warrior's head all bloody in the bag in which her servant, a fair-checked woman of excellent virtue, had fetched thither the food for them both, and Judith gave it then all gory into her hand, to her attendant, the prudent woman, to bear home. Forwards they fared thence, the two valorous women, until, bold-hearted, they passed clear of the host, the triumphant maidens, so that they could clearly behold Bethulia, the walls of the fair city shining. Then, ring-adorned, they sped their steps, till, glad of heart, they had reached the rampart gate. Warriors were sitting; watchmen were keeping guard in the stronghold, as Judith, the maiden of wisdom, the woman of valour, had bidden the sorrowing people before, when she went on her venture. Then had the loved one come again to her people, and then the wise woman quickly commanded one of the men to come to her from the far-spreading

fortress and admit her with speed through the rampart gate, and she spoke these words to the victorious people:

'I am able to tell you a thing of note, that no longer you need sorrow in soul. God, the glorious King, is gracious unto you. That has been made manifest far throughout the world, that glorious success is coming to you in splendour, and that exaltation has been granted after the afflictions you long have endured. Then the citizens were glad when they heard how the holy maiden spoke over the high rampart. The people rejoiced, the host hastened to the fortress gate, men and women together, old and young, in troops and throngs, in swarms and crowds; surged and ran in thousands towards the maiden of the Lord. The hearts of all men in the mead city were made glad when they learned that Judith was come again to her home, and then in haste they let her in with reverence. Then the wise maiden, decked with gold, bade her heedful handmaid uncover the warrior's head and show it all bleeding for a sign to the citizens of how she had sped in battle. Then the noble woman spoke to all the host:

'Victorious heroes, chiefs of the people, here you can clearly behold the head of the most hateful heathen warrior, of Holofernes now dead, who most among men dealt us out death, bitter sorrows, and was minded to do yet more; but God did not grant him longer life to lay afflictions upon us. With God's help I reft him of life. Now I wish to pray all of you citizens and shield-bearing warriors to fit yourselves forthwith for fight. When God the Creator, the merciful King, shall send from the east the shining light, bear forth the shields, the bucklers before your breasts and the corslets, the gleaming helmets, into the thick of the foe; lay low the leaders, the fated chiefs, with bloody blades. Your enemies are doomed to death, and you shall gain glory, fame in the fight, as the mighty Lord has shown you by my hand.'

Then the band of bold men was quickly made ready, men brave in battle; the valiant men and warriors marched out, bore banners of victory; they set straight forward to the fight, heroes beneath their helmets, from the sacred stronghold at break of dawn; the shields rang, resounded loudly. The lean wolf in the wood rejoiced at that, and the dark raven, the bird greedy for slaughter; both knew that the warriors purposed to provide them with a feast of fated men; and behind them flew the dewy-feathered eagle, hungry for food; dark-coated, horny-beaked, it sang a song of war. The men of battle marched on,

warriors to the strife, protected by shields, hollow linden targets—they who erstwhile had borne the flaunting of foreigners, the taunt of the heathen. All the Assyrians were rigorously required for that at the spear-play when the Hebrews under their banners had come upon the camp. Then keenly they shot forth showers of arrows, adders of war, from their bows of horn, strong shafts; the raging warriors loudly stormed, cast spears into the press of brave men; wrath were the heroes, the dwellers in the land, against the hateful race; sternly they stepped forward; stout of heart, they harshly aroused their ancient foes overcome by mead. The men with their hands drew from the sheaths the brightly adorned blades with trusty edges; fiercely they smote the Assyrian warriors, contrivers of evil; they spared no living man of the host, mean or mighty, whom they could overcome.

XII

So all morning the clansmen pursued the foreign people, until those who were angered, the chief guardians of the host, perceived that the Hebrews had violently shown them the stroke of the sword. They went to declare that in words before the eldest thanes, roused up the warriors and in terror announced to them sudden tidings, a morning alarm to men overcome by mead, dread play of swords. Then forthwith, as I heard, heroes doomed to perish shook off sleep, and sad men pressed in crowds towards the pavilion of the evil one, Holofernes. They meant straightway to make known the battle to their lord, before the terror, the might of the Hebrews, came down upon him. All supposed that the prince of men and the fair maid were together in the beautiful tent, Judith the noble and the lecher, terrible and fierce. Yet there was not one of the earls who dared awaken the warrior, or seek to find out how the soldier had fared with the sacred maiden, the virgin of the Lord. The troop drew near, the host of the Hebrews; they fought hard with keen swords; fiercely with blood-stained brands they made requital for ancient quarrels, for old grudges. The glory of the Assyrians was destroyed in that day's work, their haughtiness made humble. The men stood round their prince's pavilion, exceeding bold but gloomy in mind. Then all together they, without God to believe in, began to shout, to call loudly and to gnash their teeth, grinding their teeth in sorrow. Then their

glory was past, their success and deeds of prowess. The earls wished to waken their friendly lord; they did not succeed. Then tardily and late one of the warriors grew so bold as to venture undaunted into the tent, so strongly need drove him. Then he found his bestower of gold lying pale on the bed, reft of his spirit, despoiled of life. Then forthwith he fell cold on the ground; fierce in heart, he began to tear his hair and his robe also, and spoke these words to the warriors who in sadness remained there without:

'Here is our ruin revealed and shown to be at hand, that now in tribulation the time has come upon us when we must perish together, fall in fight. Here lies our ruler, headless, hewn by the sword.'

Then, sad of soul, they cast their weapons down; despairing, they hastened to flee. At their back fought a powerful host, until the greatest part of the army were stretched on the field of victory, laid low by war, hewn by swords, a delight to the wolves and also a joy to birds greedy for slaughter. Those who lived fled from the shields of their foes. Behind them went the army of the Hebrews, honoured with victory, made glorious with fame; the Lord God, the Almighty Prince, gave them fair help. Then the valiant heroes hastily wrought a passage with their blood-stained blades through the press of foemen; they hacked the targets, cleft the roof of shields. The fighters were enraged in the conflict, the Hebrew men; the warriors lusted exceedingly at that time after battle. There fell to earth the greater part of Assyrian nobility, the hateful race; few came alive to their native land. Valiant men turned back, warriors in retreat, amid carnage, reeking corpses. The dwellers in the land had a chance to spoil the most hateful ones, their ancient foes now lifeless, of bloody booty, beautiful ornaments, shields and broad swords, brown helmets, precious treasures. The guardians of their country had gloriously conquered their foes on the field of battle, put their old enemies to sleep with swords; those who were most hateful to them of living nations lay on the field.

Then all the tribe, most famous of peoples, proud, curly-haired, bore and brought to the fair city of Bethulia for the space of a month helmets and hip-swords, grey corslets, war-trappings of men decked with gold, treasures more splendid than any man among the sages can tell. The warriors won all that by courage, bold in battle under the banners by the wise counsel of Judith, the valorous virgin. The warlike earls brought to her

from the pursuit the sword and blood-stained helmet of Holofernes as a guerdon, likewise wide corslets decked with red gold and all the wealth and private property that the stern prince of warriors possessed, rings and bright treasures; they gave that to the fair woman of wisdom. Judith ascribed the glory of all that to the Lord of hosts who endued her with honour, fame in the realm of the world and likewise reward in heaven, the meed of victory in the splendour of the sky, because she ever held true faith in the Almighty. At the end she doubted not at all of the reward which long while she had yearned for. Therefore glory for ever be to the dear Lord who in His own mercy created the wind and the airs, the skies and spacious realms, and likewise the fierce streams and the joys of heaven.