

**JUDITH
TRIUMPHANT**

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Judith triumphant by Thompson Buchanan

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THOMPSON BUCHANAN

**JUDITH
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Judith Triumphant

By
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"The Castle Comedy"



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I



AT the foot of a mountain an army of one hundred and thirty-five thousand men lay encamped, waiting for a few thousand Hebrews to die of thirst and hunger.

For Holofernes, war-lord of the Great King, checked in his southwesterly advance on Egypt, had declared that Bethulia must fall. And both besiegers and besieged were too accustomed to the triumph of that King to doubt the issue.

In reality it seemed just a small incident in the great game between Assyria and Egypt, because for centuries Judea had been but as a highway over which invading armies pressed north or south as the balance

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of power shifted between the great Eastern and Western nations. So, no wonder, to the army without the siege was merely a trifle, a pleasant break in the monotony of marching. There would be the rest, long enough, perhaps, for the sore feet of the soldiers, wearied by the seven hundred miles of marching and the months of fighting, to heal. Next would come the forcing of the pass, the scaling of the crags, the breach in the walls, and the blood-feast. Then the army would march on southward, leaving behind a huge pyramid of rotting heads to mark the blasted ruins of a city.

Within, the besieged counted their days of life by the measures of grain in the granaries and the continued volume of the cheery mountain-stream that, bustling down from the heights above, buried itself under the city wall; then, after reappearing once at the great fountain, plunged out again on the other side over the crags to the plain below.

It was the quick eye and the clever brain of Achior, the Ammonite, that fathomed this. On the very first day he had noticed the stream and wondered vaguely. Each

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morning and each evening he looked at it letting itself down the cliffs lightly, dropping from rock to rock, and his ideas grew. By the fifth day the size of the stream had plainly diminished. Then Achior shook his head wisely, for he knew that the besieged were filling their reservoirs. If the water he saw came from a never-failing spring within the walls they would not be doing so, for there would be no necessity, the young soldier argued; and forthwith he presented himself before Holofernes to ask for permission to take his Ammonites up the crags.

The burly, bearded Tartan of the Great King turned lazily from the long-lashed, black eyes of sensuous Nin-Gul—"The Destroyer"—to give heed to the young soldier. Nin-Gul looked, too, for few women there were who did not look when Achior, the Ammonite, stood before them. His sleeveless soldier tunic, reaching almost to the knee and gathered at the waist by the broad belt that supported the long straight sword and dagger; the leathern drawers, and the boots laced to the calf, all served excellently

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to draw out the line of a figure as remarkable for extreme activity as unusual strength. The hair that the helmet could not all confine was black, while the face, proud, contained, but passionate, was strong enough to win a woman's love and hold a man's respect. Above all, it was known that few men in the whole Assyrian host could stand against Achior, while in the councils even Tharthan of Azotus, Sargan's veteran general, listened when he spoke.

"And thou sayest?" rumbled Holofernes. He had a big voice, and he seemed to lift it from his feet upward.

"That the stream must go into the city from the mountain-side. And, my lord, if thou givest me permission, I will take mine Ammonites around the crags, up the mountain, and find it. Then, it having been turned into another course, the mice of the hills must come out to us or die of thirst, and we shall win without the striking of a blow."

Holofernes exploded a great laugh.

"Do it, and next to Tharthan of Azotus, above all the Princes of Moab, thou shalt stand near me."

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As Achior, flushed with that promise, withdrew from the tent, Holofernes turned back to the black eyes of Nin-Gul, who loved him.

Cautiously, but swiftly, the captain of the Ammonites led his five hundred picked men up the rocks. Half-way down the line and in the rear his seconds in command, Rabbath and Arak of Tyrus, kept the climbers going and saw to it that no unnecessary noise was made. The soldiers, trained cragsmen from the Ammon hills, went up the Samarian mountain-side like goats. It seemed almost a flight of shadows on a rocky wall, so little noise they made. Now the shadows reached the top and crouched silent, expectant, in the thickets of the plateau above, awaiting further orders. Achior and his lieutenants drew to the edge of the crags in conference. To the left and far below them lay the sleeping Assyrian army, a host of pygmies huddling in the plain. At certain intervals the faint, glowing remains of cook-fires made out the confines of the camp. The tent of Holofernes, pitched in the very centre on a high

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place, stood forth prominently. From it came up the noise of music and singing. A feast was in progress.

Here and there about the camp the tents of other nobles and captains told the places of the various commands. The common soldiers had no tents—nor even sandals, for that matter.

The huge war-engines were great black splotches on the plain, while mere dots moving about them stood for marching sentries. And above, the full harvest-moon reached down low and lovingly over the besieged city.

Silent, grim, defiant, Bethulia hung just on the edge of the cliffs over the only pass that led from the plain of Dothan into the mountains. Ten men on the city wall could roll down rocks enough to check an army. That pass could not be forced, and Achior had found the only way to take the fortress.

Now, carefully hiding from the betraying eye of the reproachful moon, the Ammonites passed on eastward around to the south of the place. In half an hour the noise of running water checked them. The stream