

## Author's introduction

I began more with a painting than a period. I love Klimt's Golden Phase, and his languidly murderous *Judith und Holofernes* is one of my all-time favourite works of art. His Judith, more femme fatale than heroine, revels in the aftermath of Holofernes' killing, looking directly back at the viewer in challenge. The eroticism of the painting made it highly controversial when it was first displayed in Vienna in 1901. I have taken the liberty of allowing it to be temporarily exhibited in the National Gallery for the purposes of my story.

I knew I wanted to set my story in 1901, when *Judith* was painted, which led me to start exploring dynamics of violence and desire towards (and between) Edwardian women—and the restrictions they faced.

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The title comes from the Vivaldi oratorio of the same name.

# Juditha Triumphans

by Elise Withey

## *London, 1901*

Miss Alden arrived the day before the doctor's funeral.

Poor taste—the accusation rustled through Little Bethulia's drawing rooms, clinging like cigar smoke to the ends of August. Some spoke of the brougham she had travelled in, a fine-lacquered carriage in a green most unsuited for the funerary occasion. Others recalled the strange circumstances of her departure six years ago. A few even wondered what an uncanny coincidence it was that the doctor's sizeable inheritance had all passed to one woman: an outsider, childless, with no husband and no family worth remembering.

Sybil Mursey listened to the rumours with a pleasant little frisson. She had always hated the doctor. On the morning of his funeral she feigned a fever and sat in the orangery all day instead, flushed among the heady blossom smells.

Once the talk had moved on—an exhibition had just opened in the National with some shocking Austrian paintings—Sybil waited until her husband was in a good mood and then asked him over the morning paper.

“I heard,” she began, “that Miss Alden hasn’t yet been invited to dinner by any family. Perhaps we should be the first to—extend a hand?”

Her husband paused midway through turning the page.

“Only as a courtesy,” Sybil added. “She may have forgotten the way we do things here, after all.”

“Alone?”

“Oh! — not at all. I know the Kellers would love to join us. Ester’s been so curious to meet her.”

“Then it’s settled. Send out the invitations before noon.” He stood in one quick movement and Sybil nearly flinched. “After all, it’s always good to know one’s doctor well. With your condition.”

She signed the letter: *From Sybil Mursey. Your friend.*

The streetlamps outside were only just beginning to be lit when Miss Alden’s green brougham drew up outside the Mursey door. She wore her hair pinned in a widow’s coil, and

she touched Sybil's arm where the bruising was hidden by her sleeve and said, "I hope I am not too late."

They slipped into the conservatory while they waited for the Kellers, and Sybil found herself shivering despite the balmy August night. She pulled her shawl closer.

"Sybil," said her husband, "is often sickly. When the doctor was here— "

"God rest his soul."

"Of course," he said. "When he was still with us, he would call upon Sybil every few weeks— a man of great skill, and greater discretion. You were close; perhaps you know who will fill his position?"

"Why," said Miss Alden, "his old apprentice. I myself will open my practice to patients in two days' time."

The wind turned, and the scent of jasmine drifted in from the shadowed gardens. Along the flowerbeds fresh tuberose blossoms had begun to open, star-white.

"How modern," her husband said at last.

Miss Alden smiled. She was not pretty, but in the rosy darkness of the conservatory Sybil thought there was a soldier's handsomeness about her features, the angles of her face.

"Haven't you seen the new exhibition? We all seem to be very modern, these days."

The next morning Sybil woke early, and in the thin silk of her nightgown shivered her way through a second letter, the pen strokes unsteady with cold. She wrote: *Thank you for your delightful company yesterday. I did have such a lovely night.*

She meant: *You touched my sleeve and it was so gentle that I was scared.*

It was another two weeks before Sybil Mursey saw Miss Alden again. The carriage into the heart of London was not one she enjoyed, and she preferred for the most part to stay within Little Bethulia's quiet trellised neighbourhood, a safe mile-half from the city. Nevertheless, Piccadilly's tailoring could not be bested, and Sybil was having a new evening gown fitted in the healthy-waisted Parisian style when the dressmaker's door swung open to a familiar face.

"Here's a happy coincidence," said Miss Alden. Her dark hair was tied low around her shirtwaist's high white collar, and her forearms were bare. Sybil was seized with the sudden awful fear that Miss Alden had forgotten her name before she added, "Mrs Mursey."

"Oh, let me be Sybil for now. I'm not at home."

"Neither am I," she said, "for now. I saw your carriage outside; I thought that I might drop in. Forgive me if that was too presumptuous."

"Not in the slightest. In fact I would love your eye for this blue, I'm not sure if it's quite my shade—would you lend me your opinion? As my physician, of course."

Miss Alden stepped around the folding screen and then her face shuttered through four quick expressions at once. Too late Sybil realised her mistake. She drew her hands up to hide herself; not from modesty, where the half-pinned gown fell loose around her breasts, but to cover her collarbone, and the dark handprints that mottled it.

“Sybil,” Miss Alden began.

A bright tinkle of bells. The dressmaker, mouth full of pins, came shuffling in from the back of the shop with a new roll of fabric; paused, seeing Miss Alden, her widow’s coil, her hand outstretched towards Sybil’s arm.

Sybil Mursey rested a hand on her neck, took a deep breath and with her best homemaker’s smile said, “Miss Alden was just on her way out.”

Later, she wrote: *How good it was to see you today. She meant: Please.*

The weeks blurred. September came with a sweep of warm rain and a pea-soup London fog that settled over the house like a fever. That was what the neighbours were told: a fever.

Sybil’s ill again. You know how it is. The doctor was sent for.

Miss Alden found her sitting on the edge of the bed. She had not brushed her hair or rouged her cheeks.

“I’ve come to help you.”

Diagnosis, departure. Sometimes they called it neurasthenia; sometimes it was branded hysteria, or neurosis. She knew the ritual. She had not mourned the doctor's death. His eyes that saw bruises and stayed silent.

"Write me a prescription for two months' rest cure," Sybil said, "then take my husband's money and go home."

Miss Alden sat down beside her and took one of her hands instead. Her fingers were warm and the skin was rougher than Sybil had expected. Working hands. Sybil closed her eyes and tried to think of summer, of indigo darkness in the conservatory and the smell of jasmine.

She did not need to say that she could not leave him. That any claim for divorce would be dismissed on grounds of mental infirmity; after all, those doctor's records had been so carefully collated. Neurasthenia, hysteria, neurosis. Whichever label they chose to give her. The case was closed.

"Tell me about the exhibition," she said instead. "The one with the Austrian artist."

So Miss Alden began.

In her low voice she spoke of the gallery hall, the way the paintings all narrowed back before the gold of the centrepiece, an Austrian man's work lent out from Vienna; *Judith und Holofernes*. How the oils were blue and soft and the brushstrokes hazy as evening, as though you were seeing the woman through misty glass—her skin behind the gauzy trail of curtains, the edges of her breasts; her eyes, heavy with pleasure; how gold leaf burnt so

bright across the top half of the painting that you nearly missed, at the bottom, the severed head.

How Judith came to the tent of Holofernes by night and afterwards, at the end of everything, he fell into sleep, his neck bared, lost in dreams of animals running.

How when Judith beheaded him it was an act of God. It was a miracle.

"Do you think Judith knew that?"

Miss Alden's eyes were the same dark colour as the bottom of a wineglass and her hair was coming loose at her neck and she said, so unbearably close: "Klimt's Judith did. She looks happy now. She looks blissful."

Sybil could not sleep that evening. Her limbs ached, and the story glistened in her head, except when she tried to picture the Judith of Klimt's painting she saw instead the bare forearms, the widow's bun, the handsome languid stare. She rose and flung the window wide. The night air cooled her face but not her thoughts.

A beheading. A miracle.

*How I wish you could have stayed longer, she wrote. She meant: I wish I could be oil and turpentine. Paint me into you so I don't have to leave.*

The next days passed like silk slipping over skin.

“She holds herself so brazenly,” said Ester Keller, over tea. “Like everyone doesn’t know what happened with the late doctor, God ha’mercy.”

Sybil’s teacup felt suddenly unsteady in her hand. “I only moved here five years ago—a year after she left. I don’t know what you mean.”

“You never heard? She was one year widowed when he took her under his wing. Always a kind soul, our doctor was; he let her study as his apprentice, put in a good word for her with the Medical Register so she might get licensed. Taught her everything he knew—then she up and fled one night and no one could fathom why. Shameful, after everything he did for her. Shameful behaviour.”

Sybil Mursey said nothing, but she clutched the handle of her teacup so hard she feared it might shatter.

She wrote: *Give me your miracles, then.*

They met at the exhibition. It was safe there, Sybil told herself; the people of good society wouldn’t dare show themselves in the presence of such a scandalous work of art. But in truth she wanted secretly to see Judith’s expression for herself, to swallow down the bliss in those hungry eyes and pretend, for a moment, that it could be hers.

Miss Alden, in her long black skirt and matching suit jacket, a fox-fur around her neck against the October chill, took Sybil’s hand in both of hers and said, urgently, “You must be certain.”



Above her, Judith. Soft in blue, the brushstrokes swimming into a heady vision. Yet when Sybil searched her body it was unblemished. She recalled Holofernes' strength. She thought perhaps that the artist had forgotten, in all that milky skin, that Judith ought to have some bruising too.

"Were you certain," she asked, "when you left the doctor?"

Miss Alden looked up at the painting. When she turned back her face was tired, worn by an ancient sadness. "He taught me so much. I was young, and still grieving. I did not know what he wanted in return until he took it from me."

"And now he's gone."

"You understand. You must understand. At the end of everything—these miracles. We make them ourselves."

Sybil stepped closer. The gallery hall was empty, their only audience the paintings, and she dared to lean in until the softness of the fox-fur brushed her cheek. Miss Alden smelt of August nights, and a cool wind rustling through the flowerbeds. She pressed the vial into Sybil's hands. It was small. Two drops would do.

"You won't leave."

"Find me afterwards," Miss Alden said softly, her eyes that wine-bottom dark. "I will not leave."

Afterwards. How Judith came to the tent of Holofernes by night and afterwards—

—afterwards, at the end of everything, after the funerals and the drawing-room gossip and the smell of jasmine in the conservatory, after the evening gowns and the hurried goodbyes, the paint dappling the unbruised skin, *I wish I could be oil and turpentine—*

—afterwards, perhaps, a warm bed. A gentleness. A miracle.

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#### **Author's Notes:**

**Klimt's *Judith und Holofernes* was part of the artist's "Golden Phase", and features a startlingly different Judith to the chaste widow of biblical canon. His Judith, more femme fatale than heroine, revels in the aftermath of Holofernes' killing, looking directly back at the viewer in challenge. The eroticism of the painting made it highly controversial when it was first displayed in Vienna in 1901. I have taken the liberty of allowing it to be temporarily exhibited in the National Gallery for the purposes of my story.**

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