

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

[*The Dream of the Rood* is the most beautiful of Old English religious poems. The radiant vision, the simple devout wonder of the dreamer, the pathos of the Crucifixion as told by the Cross are unmarred by the set lifeless phrases so common in Old English religious verse. The authorship of the poem has been much discussed. Before the poem was discovered in the *Vercelli Book*, some lines were found and deciphered on an old stone cross at Ruthwell, near Dumfries. These lines, which correspond to certain portions of the poem, were ascribed to Cædmon, but the arguments which supported this theory have been discredited. A good case has been made out for regarding Cynewulf as the author, though there is no certainty in the matter. In style and mood *The Dream of the Rood* offers many resemblances to the known poems of Cynewulf, and *Elene* shows his interest in the cross as a subject for poetry.]

Lo! I will declare the best of dreams which I dreamt in the middle of the night, when human creatures lay at rest. It seemed to me that I saw a wondrous tree rising aloft, encompassed with light, the brightest of crosses. All that sign was overlaid with gold; fair jewels were set at the surface of the earth; there were also five upon the cross-beam. All the angels of God, fair by creation, looked on there; verily that was no malefactor's cross, but holy spirits gazed on Him there, men upon earth and all this glorious universe.

Wondrous was the cross of victory, and I, stained with sins, stricken with foulness; I saw the glorious tree joyfully gleaming, adorned with garments, decked with gold; jewels had fitly covered the tree of the Lord. Yet through that gold I could perceive the former strife of wretched men, that it had once bled on the right side. I was all troubled with sorrows; I was full of fear at the fair sight. I saw the changeful sign alter in garments and colours; at times it was bedewed with moisture, stained with the flowing of blood, at times adorned with treasure.

Yet I, lying there a long space, beheld in sorrow the

zeal, where I was alone with none to bear me company. My soul was eager to depart; I felt many yearnings within me. Now I have joy of life that I can seek the triumphant cross alone more often than all men, do it full honour. Great is the desire for that in my heart, and to the cross I turn for help. I have not many powerful friends on earth, but they have gone away hence from the joys of the world, have sought the King of heaven, live now in heaven with God the Father, dwell in glory; and each day I look for the time when the Lord's cross, which erstwhile I saw here on earth, will fetch me from this fleeting life, and bring me then where there is great gladness, joy in heaven, where God's people are placed at the feast, where there is bliss unending; and will set me then where I may thereafter dwell in glory, enjoy happiness fully with the saints. May the Lord, who here on earth suffered aforetime on the cross for the sins of men, be a friend unto me; He has redeemed us and has given us life, a heavenly home.

Hope was born anew with blessedness and joy for those who before endured the burning. The Son was triumphant on his journey, mighty and successful, when He, the Master almighty, came with the throng, the company of spirits,¹ into God's kingdom—to the gladness of the angels and all the saints who before dwelt in heaven in glory, when their Lord, almighty God, came where his home was.

¹ Those whom Christ redeemed when He descended to hell.