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Jurgen

A Comedy of Justice

BY

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NEW YORK : MCMXXXII

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY

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UPON reflection I have decided not to write any new preface for "Jurgen." Otherwise, I would here explain that the writer whom I have seen identified, in some place or another, as "the author of 'Jurgen'" aimed with this volume to introduce into the Biography the element of gallantry, as well as yet further to foreshadow every poet's fundamental attitude toward life. For "Jurgen" deals, of course, with Dom Manuel's second daughter, Dorothy la Désirée, whose forte it was to inspire — and, for that matter, to participate in, — gallantry.

And I would explain, too, that to each of the daughters of Manuel is allotted in the Biography her province. As Ettarre la Beale remains, forever, the dream of all true poets, so did Dame Melicent in her day prompt her adorers to chivalry; and so did Dorothy la Désirée incite, not only many lighter gallantries, but also, as you have already heard, "a variation upon the Grail legend, . . . and a hungering and a dreaming that will not die, and a laughter which derides its utterer." Hereinafter you have the gist of this epic: and I believe the considerate will perceive this Dorothy la Désirée, howsoever infrequent her

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corporeal entrances, to remain throughout this narrative its most important character. . . . Nay, more: I would have pointed out — in the preface which I do not elect to write, — that this Dorothy is very actually, in the phrase which I do not love, the author of Jurgen. For light women have their invaluable uses, the more especially in the forming of poets, who one and all derive, even nowadays, their aberrations from Troy Town. Thus, it is of Helen that they dream, of that sweet tacit queen, tall, brightly colored and impalpable, and as forever ageless as any other mist tatter: but it was a Cressida who shaped them, and who made each poet vocal, as well as, at the last pinch, ruthless. To this rule there is no possible exception: and all fine literature — together, to be sure, with most of its lower branches, — was mothered by one or another wanton. . . .

I am tempted here to digress, and to catalogue those beneficent ladies whose prettiness and fond unfaith have, since the heyday of Catullus, so materially enriched our libraries; and thus, through a pleasing fog of remarkably elegant language, to escape from my proper task of contriving for this volume a brand-new preface. For I am indissuadably set against ever writing a second preface for this “Jurgen.”

OTHERWISE, I would — in that still unwritten preface, — be recording hereabouts that “Jurgen”

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was begun in the March of 1918, and completed in the October of the same year. The manuscript stayed in my desk drawer, though, for some time thereafter, so as to allow for the publication of "Beyond Life"; and it in consequence received a liberal amount of retouching during the first part of 1919. Meanwhile a portion of the first chapter and of the chapters recording Jurgen's third entrance into the cave were shaped into the semblance of a short story, and the result was published in the July 1918 issue of the old Smart Set, under the auspices of H. L. Mencken, who thus assumed the responsibility of Jurgen's début in print.

The book was published in September 1919, and rather promptly got into trouble. . . . All this, though, is recorded in "Jurgen and the Law," so that there is no need for me in any second preface to rehearse the legal history of this book, nor, in fact, to set down any other of these trivial matters.

MOREOVER, — I repeat, — I am indissuadably set against writing any kind of preface for this "Jurgen," to which "the author of 'Jurgen'" has become in some degree a satellite. It is, the majority assure me, immeasurably the best of all this author's books, so much so, indeed, that the other books are in comparison not particularly worth reading. . . . Thereafter I in meditation may, now and then, permissibly go so far as to echo the verdict of the young Duke of

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Logreus as to the people of Glathion: but I emulate, too, his wise taciturnity. I bow to the immutable law that the true worth of any book, even of such sad stuff as "Don Quixote" and "Pride and Prejudice" and "Tom Jones," depends not upon what the author has put into its pages but upon what one or another reader, for one or another reason, gets out of them. And I do not press the point that this "Jurgen" seems to me not truly an individual book but just the sixth chapter of the Biography.

Meanwhile, however, with that slight but necessary aloofness characteristic of every satellite, the author of "Jurgen" is condemned to refrain from any criticism of "Jurgen"; and so lacks, I take it, all matter for any possible preface. The opinions of a Frankenstein upon the topic of monsters are open to suspicion. And meanwhile, too, I look with lively and with rather wistful interest upon the very first draft of the book which actually did give its writer, after eighteen years, more or less of a literary career, and which became ultimately the volume now in your hand, but still without any preface.

THE thing covers, in all, just two sheets of "examination pad" paper: and, viewing these half-forgotten pencilings, it seems droll enough to consider this half ounce of wood-pulp which epitomizes either — according to your point of view, — the foetus of my ill-fame or else the sole arguable excuse for my

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existence. In either aspect the thing seems a bit inadequate.

Across the top of the first page I find written "Go to the Devil" — "Some Ladies and Jurgen" — "The Pawnbroker's Shirt." And I recall, now, that each of these — along with "A Year from Wednesday," — was a title which the author of "Jurgen" once tentatively accorded to this volume.

And I discover that the book was originally planned in ten long chapters with an epilogue, for after the possible titles these divisions are painstakingly listed. I record them just as they stand, employing Roman type to show the canceled words:

"How Jurgen Was Rid of the Plague of His Life.

"How Jurgen Returned to (?the Kingdom) the Garden between Dawn and Sunrise (?Nessus).

"How Jurgen Won a Gift from Mother Sereda (?Visited Mother Wednesday).

"How Jurgen Rescued a (?Won to the Far) Princess (from the buried galley) (Guenevere) (his foreknowledge).

"How Jurgen Served (the) a Sorceress (Anaitis) (= Morgaine la Fée) (?Nimuë).

"How Jurgen Loved (the) a Dryad (∫ saw Queen Helen in Leukê).

"How Jurgen (Sank) Was Cast into (Hell) the Hell of his Fathers (succuba).

"How Jurgen (Rose to Heaven) Got into his Grandmother's Heaven (?Paradise).

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“How Jurgen Took Counsel with His Shadow (Sereda).”

“How Jurgen Found Koshchei: — (Guenevere, Anaitis & Helen).”

“How Jurgen Sat by the Fire.”

And I find also that parts three to nine are enclosed in a large bracket beside which is written, “Youth & the double shadow.” For it seems that Jurgen, once, in his false youth was accompanied by two shadows. What they were I have forgotten.

THEN, evidently, with his outline fairly well established, the yet youngish person who wrote “Jurgen” in 1918 must have set down the various “points” of the intended book just as they occurred to him, for the next paragraph begins abruptly:

“The Sorceress shows him Helen — ?hourglass — the devils in their shapes and traits — Jacob’s Ladder — day in the forest — his dead loves — Raknar, crowned, & at his feet three chests of silver — Excalibur — the talisman & Lisa — chair & chessboard — Cogaingne is the summer home of Anaitis.”

Thus do I discover that the Thragnar of the book was originally Raknar, come out of the Bârda Saga with his loot from the Saga of Hromund Greipson. I remember that “the Sorceress” passed through a brief season of being Cleopatra, on her way to becoming Anaitis. . . . But that “day in the forest” puz-

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zles me. Then, very cloudily, I recollect that, still in a version of the book which was never put down upon paper, Gogyrvan Gawr accorded to the rescuer of his daughter a day quite alone with her in the Druid forest: and I recall how at sunset Jurgen, with the girl yet in his arms, heard from afar the horns of the approaching cavalcade which came to fetch young Guenevere to Arthur's court; and how Jurgen, as a well-seasoned reader of romance, foreknew, in the moment that she protested her undying love for him, all which was to befall this Guenevere during the remainder of her life. And I imagine that this notion was transmogrified a little by a little, as the book advanced, and that in a variant form it was transferred to the present seventh chapter, where the essentials remain, but are attached to quite another young woman.

In brief, only "the talisman" gravels me. I can recollect nothing whatever about it. And, plainly, the author's allusion cannot well be to Jurgen's cantrap, since with the cantrap Lisa is in no way connected.

The next three, very brief paragraphs, however, seem to have been adhered to faithfully enough. It is obvious that the author of "Jurgen" is here about his "time-plot," and is fitting the travels of his hero to the transitions of the sun.

"?Even year in all — Walburga's Eve — May Day — (Cameliard) May to 21 June — (Cocaigne) 21 June to 22 September — (Leukê) 22 September

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to 22 December — (Hell) 22 December to 22 March — & to Heaven (37 days) 30 April — May Day.”

All this seems comprehensible enough. In practice, to be sure, it proved impossible to imagine how Jurgen would employ himself during thirty-seven whole days in Heaven, and that difficulty had to be got around. . . . But the author of “Jurgen” has added, with conspicuous inconsequence:

“The Mass — the boat journey to Cogaingne — the beach & the wall.

“He repeats in epitome his real life, that is, in the face of memory, does all that he regrets, all over again.”

THEREAFTER follows just one paragraph, but a tremendously long one:

“Jurgen comes upon Helen asleep — his grandmother for whom Heaven was made — the protestants against error, who cast the Greek gods into Hell — Sereda to Merlin is Dana — Pan in the forest — the two children of Anaitis, with whom Jurgen amuses himself when she is preoccupied by her social duties, as involved in religious ceremonies — Jurgen as ghost of Gogyrvan’s grandfather, who had “known” Jurgen’s grandmother — the riffraff about Anaitis — The Breaking of the Veil — Sereda seen as Cybele, that is, the world — in the hourglass

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the sands turn to vapor & rise — Jurgen is made small & enters, so that he walks in a desert, then among boulders — ?stripped of the non-essentials — leaves Excalibur (?or Caliburn) with Anaitis — Varvara is sister to Melicent & Ettarre — Second chapter at Storisende, third at Bellegarde — Hell is made for those who believe in the importance of their own sins, & Jurgen talks with his father there — in Paradise are only his grandmother's ideas, he being among them — the devils & the angels confess to being illusions provided by Koshchei, who admires pride & love because these are emotions unattainable by him when he contemplates the universe for which he is responsible — the Furies are the daughters of Anaitis, delightful little girls — in Leukê Helen is wedded to Achilles — at Storisende are Townsend & Stella, & Rudolph & Anne — he goes into the forest to learn All — for Anaitis he fights the Master Philologist & is defeated — Jurgen talks with Varvara on the way home, & end with Jurgen peeping in the window at Lisa & the house set in order — he sighs & enters.”

And that, word for word, completes the primal draft of “Jurgen.”

Now, as I regard this last long paragraph, I note, first of all, that Dorothea la Désirée seems to have come originally, with Sereda, out of Russia, and to

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have been called Varvara; then, that Sereda too had once another name, having somehow adventured into Celtic mythology; that the family of Anaitis increased with noticeable speed during the setting down of this paragraph; that a new ending — still not quite the ending of the present book, — is being devised for the story, to replace that first-thought-of epilogue in which old Jurgen nodded peacefully beside his hearthfire; and that the notion of Jurgen's actually going into the hourglass of Time (instead of traveling with the Equinox), and of his being stripped of his non-essentials, and thus dwindling in size, — with the grains of sand he trod upon becoming always relatively larger and larger, until at last a midget was toiling toward Helen among veritable boulders, — that this notion seems to have possibilities of which, for one reason or another, the author of "Jurgen" did not avail himself. I am sure I do not know why.

Yet, upon the whole, "Jurgen" seems to have developed logically enough from that first draft, with far less of futile blundering into blind alleys as the tale developed than, as I have elsewhere recorded, are revealed by the notes made for "Figures of Earth."

That, anyhow, is the entire first draft of "Jurgen." So I transcribe it here unchanged. And I placatingly allow my original, quite harmless intentions,

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just as they were ten years ago, to supply in this volume the place of that yet unwritten preface which I am so indissuadably set against ever writing. We have it upon excellent authority that everybody ought to be judged — after all, — by his intentions.

James Branch Cabell

Richmond-in-Virginia
March 1928