

JURGEN

A Comedy of Justice

By

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

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*"Of JURGEN eke they maken mencioun,
That of an old wyf gat his youthe agoon,
And gat himselfe a shirte as bright as fyre
Wherein to jape, yet gat not his desire
In any countrie ne condicioun."*

**TO
BURTON RASCOE**

Before each tarradiddle,
Uncowed by sciolists,
Robuster persons twiddle
Tremendously big fists.

"Our gods are good," they tell us;
"Nor will our gods defer
Remission of rude fellows'
Ability to err."

So this, your JURGEN, travels
Content to compromise
Ordainments none unravels
Explicitly ... and sighs.

* * * * *

"Others, with better moderation, do either entertain the vulgar history of Jurgen as a fabulous addition unto the true and authentic story of St. Iurgenius of Poictesme, or else we conceive the literal acception to be a misconstruction of the symbolical expression: apprehending a veritable history, in an emblem or piece of Christian poesy. And this emblematical construction hath been received by men not forward to extenuate the acts of saints."

—PHILIP BORSDALE.

"A forced construction is very idle. If readers of *The High History of Jurgen* do not meddle with the allegory, the allegory will not meddle with them. Without minding it at all, the whole is as plain as a pikestaff. It might as well be pretended that we cannot see Poussin's pictures without first being told the allegory, as that the allegory aids us in understanding *Jurgen*."

—E. NOEL CODMAN.

"Too urbane to advocate delusion, too hale for the bitterness of irony, this fable of Jurgen is, as the world itself, a book wherein each man will find what his nature enables him to see; which gives us back each his own image; and which teaches us each the lesson that each of us desires to learn."

—JOHN FREDERICK LEWISTAM.

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A FOREWORD

"Nescio quid certè est: et Hylax in limine latrat."

A Foreword: Which Asserts Nothing.

In Continental periodicals not more than a dozen articles in all would seem to have given accounts or partial translations of the Jurgen legends. No thorough investigation of this epos can be said to have appeared in print, anywhere, prior to the publication, in 1913, of the monumental *Synopses of Aryan Mythology* by Angelo de Ruiz. It is unnecessary to observe that in this exhaustive digest Professor de Ruiz has given (VII, p. 415 *et sequentia*) a summary of the greater part of these legends as contained in the collections of Verville and Bülg; and has discussed at length and with much learning the esoteric meaning of these folk-stories and their bearing upon questions to which the "solar theory" of myth explanation has given rise. To his volumes, and to the pages of Mr. Lewistam's *Key to the Popular Tales of Poictesme*, must be referred all those who may elect to think of Jurgen as the resplendent, journeying and procreative sun.

Equally in reading hereinafter will the judicious waive all allegorical interpretation, if merely because the suggestions hitherto advanced are inconveniently various. Thus Verville finds the Nessus shirt a symbol of retribution, where Bülg, with rather wide divergence, would have it represent the dangerous gift of genius. Then it may be remembered that Dr. Codman says, without any hesitancy, of Mother Sereda: "This Mother Middle is the world generally (an obvious anagram of *Erda es*), and this Sereda rules not merely the middle of the working-days but the midst of everything. She is the factor of *middleness*, of mediocrity, of an avoidance of extremes, of the eternal compromise begotten by use and wont. She is the Mrs. Grundy of the Léshy; she is Comstockery: and her shadow is common-sense." Yet Codman speaks with certainly no more authority than Prote, when the latter, in his *Origins of Fable*, declares this epos is "a parable of ... man's vain journeying in search of that rationality and justice which his nature craves, and discovers nowhere in the universe: and the shirt is an emblem of this instinctive craving, as ... the shadow symbolizes

conscience. Sereda typifies a surrender to life as it is, a giving up of man's rebellious self-centredness and selfishness: the anagram being *se dare*."

Thus do interpretations throng and clash, and neatly equal the commentators in number. Yet possibly each one of these unriddlings, with no doubt a host of others, is conceivable: so that wisdom will dwell upon none of them very seriously.

With the origin and the occult meaning of the folklore of Poictesme this book at least is in no wise concerned: its unambitious aim has been merely to familiarize English readers with the Jurgen epos for the tale's sake. And this tale of old years is one which, by rare fortune, can be given to English readers almost unabridged, in view of the singular delicacy and pure-mindedness of the Jurgen mythos: in all, not more than a half-dozen deletions have seemed expedient (and have been duly indicated) in order to remove such sparse and unimportant outcroppings of mediæval frankness as might conceivably offend the squeamish.

Since this volume is presented simply as a story to be read for pastime, neither morality nor symbolism is hereinafter educed, and no "parallels" and "authorities" are quoted. Even the gaps are left unbridged by guesswork: whereas the historic and mythological problems perhaps involved are relinquished to those really thoroughgoing scholars whom erudition qualifies to deal with such topics, and tedium does not deter....

In such terms, and thus far, ran the Foreword to the first issues of this book, whose later fortunes have made necessary the lengthening of the Foreword with a postscript. The needed addition—this much at least chiming with good luck—is brief. It is just that fragment which some scholars, since the first appearance of this volume, have asserted—upon what perfect frankness must describe as not indisputable grounds—to be a portion of the thirty-second chapter of the complete form of *La Haulte Histoire de Jurgen*.

And in reply to what these scholars assert, discretion says nothing. For this fragment was, of course, unknown when the High History was first put into English, and there in consequence appears, here, little to be won either by endorsing or denying its claims to authenticity. Rather, does

discretion prompt the appending, without any gloss or scholia, of this fragment, which deals with

The Judging of Jurgen.

Now a court was held by the Philistines to decide whether or no King Jurgen should be relegated to limbo. And when the judges were prepared for judging, there came into the court a great tumblebug, rolling in front of him his loved and properly housed young ones. With the creature came pages, in black and white, bearing a sword, a staff and a lance.

This insect looked at Jurgen, and its pincers rose erect in horror. The bug cried to the three judges, "Now, by St. Anthony! this Jurgen must forthwith be relegated to limbo, for he is offensive and lewd and lascivious and indecent."

"And how can that be?" says Jurgen.

"You are offensive," the bug replied, "because this page has a sword which I choose to say is not a sword. You are lewd because that page has a lance which I prefer to think is not a lance. You are lascivious because yonder page has a staff which I elect to declare is not a staff. And finally, you are indecent for reasons of which a description would be objectionable to me, and which therefore I must decline to reveal to anybody."

"Well, that sounds logical," says Jurgen, "but still, at the same time, it would be no worse for an admixture of common-sense. For you gentlemen can see for yourselves, by considering these pages fairly and as a whole, that these pages bear a sword and a lance and a staff, and nothing else whatever; and you will deduce, I hope, that all the lewdness is in the insectival mind of him who itches to be calling these things by other names."

The judges said nothing as yet. But they that guarded Jurgen, and all the other Philistines, stood to this side and to that side with their eyes shut tight, and all these said: "We decline to look at the pages fairly and as a whole, because to look might seem to imply a doubt of what the tumblebug has decreed. Besides, as long as the tumblebug has reasons

which he declines to reveal, his reasons stay unanswerable, and you are plainly a prurient rascal who are making trouble for yourself."

"To the contrary," says Jurgen, "I am a poet, and I make literature."

"But in Philistia to make literature and to make trouble for yourself are synonyms," the tumblebug explained. "I know, for already we of Philistia have been pestered by three of these makers of literature. Yes, there was Edgar, whom I starved and hunted until I was tired of it: then I chased him up a back alley one night, and knocked out those annoying brains of his. And there was Walt, whom I chivvied and battered from place to place, and made a paralytic of him: and him, too, I labelled offensive and lewd and lascivious and indecent. Then later there was Mark, whom I frightened into disguising himself in a clown's suit, so that nobody might suspect him to be a maker of literature: indeed, I frightened him so that he hid away the greater part of what he had made until after he was dead, and I could not get at him. That was a disgusting trick to play on me, I consider. Still, these are the only three detected makers of literature that have ever infested Philistia, thanks be to goodness and my vigilance, but for both of which we might have been no more free from makers of literature than are the other countries."

"Now, but these three," cried Jurgen, "are the glory of Philistia: and of all that Philistia has produced, it is these three alone, whom living ye made least of, that to-day are honored wherever art is honored, and where nobody bothers one way or the other about Philistia."

"What is art to me and my way of living?" replied the tumblebug, wearily. "I have no concern with art and letters and the other lewd idols of foreign nations. I have in charge the moral welfare of my young, whom I roll here before me, and trust with St. Anthony's aid to raise in time to be God-fearing tumblebugs like me, delighting in what is proper to their nature. For the rest, I have never minded dead men being well-spoken-of. No, no, my lad: once whatever I may do means nothing to you, and once you are really rotten, you will find the tumblebug friendly enough. Meanwhile I am paid to protest that living persons are offensive and lewd and lascivious and indecent, and one must live."

Then the Philistines who stood to this side and to that side said in indignant unison: "And we, the reputable citizenry of Philistia, are not at all in sympathy with those who would take any protest against the tumblebug as a justification of what they are pleased to call art. The harm done by the tumblebug seems to us very slight, whereas the harm done by the self-styled artist may be very great."

Jurgen now looked more attentively at this queer creature: and he saw that the tumblebug was malodorous, certainly, but at bottom honest and well-meaning; and this seemed to Jurgen the saddest thing he had found among the Philistines. For the tumblebug was sincere in his insane doings, and all Philistia honored him sincerely, so that there was nowhere any hope for this people.

Therefore King Jurgen addressed himself, as his need was, to submit to the strange customs of the Philistines. "Now do you judge me fairly," cried Jurgen to his judges, "if there be any justice in this mad country. And if there be none, do you relegate me to limbo or to any other place, so long as in that place this tumblebug is not omnipotent and sincere and insane."

And Jurgen waited....

* * * * *

JURGEN

... amara lento temperet risu

1.

Why Jurgen Did the Manly Thing

It is a tale which they narrate in Poictesme, saying: In the 'old days lived a pawnbroker named Jurgen; but what his wife called him was very often much worse than that. She was a high-spirited woman, with no especial gift for silence. Her name, they say, was Adelais, but people by ordinary called her Dame Lisa.

They tell, also, that in the old days, after putting up the shop-windows for the night, Jurgen was passing the Cistercian Abbey, on his way home: and one of the monks had tripped over a stone in the roadway. He was cursing the devil who had placed it there.

"Fie, brother!" says Jurgen, "and have not the devils enough to bear as it is?"

"I never held with Origen," replied the monk; "and besides, it hurt my great-toe confoundedly."

"None the less," observes Jurgen, "it does not behoove God-fearing persons to speak with disrespect of the divinely appointed Prince of Darkness. To your further confusion, consider this monarch's industry! day and night you may detect him toiling at the task Heaven set him. That is a thing can be said of few communicants and of no monks. Think, too, of his fine artistry, as evidenced in all the perilous and lovely snares of this world, which it is your business to combat, and mine to lend money upon. Why, but for him we would both be vocationless! Then, too, consider his philanthropy! and deliberate how insufferable would be our case if you and I, and all our fellow parishioners, were to-day hobnobbing with other beasts in the Garden which we pretend to desiderate on Sundays! To arise with swine and lie down with the hyena?—oh, intolerable!"

Thus he ran on, devising reasons for not thinking too harshly of the Devil. Most of it was an abridgement of some verses Jurgen had composed, in the shop when business was slack.

"I consider that to be stuff and nonsense," was the monk's glose.

"No doubt your notion is sensible," observed the pawnbroker: "but mine is the prettier."

Then Jurgen passed the Cistercian Abbey, and was approaching Bellegarde, when he met a black gentleman, who saluted him and said:

"Thanks, Jurgen, for your good word."

"Who are you, and why do you thank me?" asks Jurgen.

"My name is no great matter. But you have a kind heart, Jurgen. May your life be free from care!"

"Save us from hurt and harm, friend, but I am already married."

"Eh, sirs, and a fine clever poet like you!"

"Yet it is a long while now since I was a practising poet."

"Why, to be sure! You have the artistic temperament, which is not exactly suited to the restrictions of domestic life. Then I suppose your wife has her own personal opinion about poetry, Jurgen."

"Indeed, sir, her opinion would not bear repetition, for I am sure you are unaccustomed to such language."

"This is very sad. I am afraid your wife does not quite understand you, Jurgen."

"Sir," says Jurgen, astounded, "do you read people's inmost thoughts?"

The black gentleman seemed much dejected. He pursed his lips, and fell to counting upon his fingers: as they moved his sharp nails glittered like flame-points.

"Now but this is a very deplorable thing," says the black gentleman, "to have befallen the first person I have found ready to speak a kind word for evil. And in all these centuries, too! Dear me, this is a most regrettable

instance of mismanagement! No matter, Jurgen, the morning is brighter than the evening. How I will reward you, to be sure!"

So Jurgen thanked the simple old creature politely. And when Jurgen reached home his wife was nowhere to be seen. He looked on all sides and questioned everyone, but to no avail. Dame Lisa had vanished in the midst of getting supper ready—suddenly, completely and inexplicably, just as (in Jurgen's figure) a windstorm passes and leaves behind it a tranquillity which seems, by contrast, uncanny. Nothing could explain the mystery, short of magic: and Jurgen on a sudden recollected the black gentleman's queer promise. Jurgen crossed himself.

"How unjustly now," says Jurgen, "do some people get an ill name for gratitude! And now do I perceive how wise I am, always to speak pleasantly of everybody, in this world of tale-bearers."

Then Jurgen prepared his own supper, went to bed, and slept soundly.

"I have implicit confidence," says he, "in Lisa. I have particular confidence in her ability to take care of herself in any surroundings."

That was all very well: but time passed, and presently it began to be rumored that Dame Lisa walked on Morven. Her brother, who was a grocer and a member of the town-council, went thither to see about this report. And sure enough, there was Jurgen's wife walking in the twilight and muttering incessantly.

"Fie, sister!" says the town-councillor, "this is very unseemly conduct for a married woman, and a thing likely to be talked about."

"Follow me!" replied Dame Lisa. And the town-councillor followed her a little way in the dusk, but when she came to Amneran Heath and still went onward, he knew better than to follow.

Next evening the elder sister of Dame Lisa went to Morven. This sister had married a notary, and was a shrewd woman. In consequence, she took with her this evening a long wand of peeled willow-wood. And there was Jurgen's wife walking in the twilight and muttering incessantly.

"Fie, sister!" says the notary's wife, who was a shrewd woman, "and do you not know that all this while Jurgen does his own sewing, and is once more making eyes at Countess Dorothy?"

Dame Lisa shuddered; but she only said, "Follow me!"

And the notary's wife followed her to Amneran Heath, and across the heath, to where a cave was. This was a place of abominable repute. A lean hound came to meet them there in the twilight, lolling his tongue: but the notary's wife struck thrice with her wand, and the silent beast left them. And Dame Lisa passed silently into the cave, and her sister turned and went home to her children, weeping.

So the next evening Jurgen himself came to Morven, because all his wife's family assured him this was the manly thing to do. Jurgen left the shop in charge of Urien Villemarche, who was a highly efficient clerk. Jurgen followed his wife across Amneran Heath until they reached the cave. Jurgen would willingly have been elsewhere.

For the hound squatted upon his haunches, and seemed to grin at Jurgen; and there were other creatures abroad, that flew low in the twilight, keeping close to the ground like owls; but they were larger than owls and were more discomfiting. And, moreover, all this was just after sunset upon Walburga's Eve, when almost anything is rather more than likely to happen.

So Jurgen said, a little peevisly: "Lisa, my dear, if you go into the cave I will have to follow you, because it is the manly thing to do. And you know how easily I take cold."

The voice of Dame Lisa, now, was thin and wailing, a curiously changed voice. "There is a cross about your neck. You must throw that away."

Jurgen was wearing such a cross, through motives of sentiment, because it had once belonged to his dead mother. But now, to please his wife, he removed the trinket, and hung it on a barberry bush; and with the reflection that this was likely to prove a deplorable business, he followed Dame Lisa into the cave.

2.

Assumption of a Noted Garment

The tale tells that all was dark there, and Jurgen could see no one. But the cave stretched straight forward, and downward, and at the far end was a glow of light. Jurgen went on and on, and so came presently to a centaur: and this surprised him not a little, because Jurgen knew that centaurs were imaginary creatures.

Certainly they were curious to look at: for here was the body of a fine bay horse, and rising from its shoulders, the sun-burnt body of a young fellow who regarded Jurgen with grave and not unfriendly eyes. The Centaur was lying beside a fire of cedar and juniper wood: near him was a platter containing a liquid with which he was anointing his hoofs. This stuff, as the Centaur rubbed it in with his fingers, turned the appearance of his hoofs to gold.

"Hail, friend," says Jurgen, "if you be the work of God."

"Your protasis is not good Greek," observed the Centaur, "because in Hellas we did not make such reservations. Besides, it is not so much my origin as my destination which concerns you."

"Well, friend, and whither are you going?"

"To the garden between dawn and sunrise, Jurgen."

"Surely, now, but that is a fine name for a garden! and it is a place I would take joy to be seeing."

"Up upon my back, Jurgen, and I will take you thither," says the Centaur, and heaved to his feet. Then said the Centaur, when the pawnbroker hesitated: "Because, as you must understand, there is no other way. For this garden does not exist, and never did exist, in what men humorously called real life; so that of course only imaginary creatures such as I can enter it."

"That sounds very reasonable," Jurgen estimated: "but as it happens, I am looking for my wife, whom I suspect to have been carried off by a devil, poor fellow!"

And Jurgen began to explain to the Centaur what had befallen.

The Centaur laughed. "It may be for that reason I am here. There is, in any event, only one remedy in this matter. Above all devils—and above all gods, they tell me, but certainly above all centaurs—is the power of Koshchei the Deathless, who made things as they are."

"It is not always wholesome," Jurgen submitted, "to speak of Koshchei. It seems especially undesirable in a dark place like this."

"None the less, I suspect it is to him you must go for justice."

"I would prefer not doing that," said Jurgen, with unaffected candor.

"You have my sympathy: but there is no question of preference where Koshchei is concerned. Do you think, for example, that I am frowning in this underground place by my own choice? and knew your name by accident?"

Jurgen was frightened, a little. "Well, well! but it is usually the deuce and all, this doing of the manly thing. How, then, can I come to Koshchei?"

"Roundabout," says the Centaur. "There is never any other way."

"And is the road to this garden roundabout?"

"Oh, very much so, inasmuch as it circumvents both destiny and common-sense."

"Needs must, then," says Jurgen: "at all events, I am willing to taste any drink once."

"You will be chilled, though, traveling as you are. For you and I are going a queer way, in search of justice, over the grave of a dream and through the malice of time. So you had best put on this shirt above your other clothing."

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