

Honoré James Henry

A Novelle by  
Hanna Rion

# LIPPINCOTT'S

MAGAZINE

*Other fascinating features  
by*

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# JUDITH'S CREED

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

*"It does not appear that the age thought his works worthy of posterity, nor that this great poet himself levied any ideal tribute on future times, or had any further prospect than of present popularity and present profit. So careless was he, indeed, of fame, that, when he retired to ease and plenty, while he was yet little declined into the vale of years, and before he could be disgusted with fatigue or disabled by infirmity, he desired only that in this rural quiet he who had so long mazed his imagination by following phantoms might at last be cured of his delirious ecstasies, and as a hermit might estimate the transactions of the world."*

HE was hoping, while his fingers drummed in unison with the beat of his verse, that this last play at least would rouse enthusiasm in the pit. The welcome given its immediate predecessors had undeniably been tepid. A memorandum at his elbow, of the receipts at the Globe for the last quarter, showed this with disastrous bluntness; and, after all, in 1609 a shareholder in a theater, when writing dramas for production there, was ordinarily subject to more claims than those of his ideals.

He sat in a neglected garden whose growth was in reversion to primal habits. The season was September, the sky a uniform if tempered blue. A peach-tree, laden past its strength with fruitage, made about him with its boughs a sort of tent. The grass around his writing-table was largely hidden by long, crinkled peach leaves—some brown and others gray as yet—and was dotted with a host of brightly-colored peaches. Fidgeting bees and flies were excavating the decayed spots in this wasting fruit, from which emanated a vinous odor. The bees hummed drowsily, their industry facilitating idleness in others. It was curious—he meditated, his thoughts straying from "an uninhabited island"—how these insects alternated in color between brown vel-

vet and silver, as they blundered about a flickering tessellation of amber and somber green . . . in search of rottenness . . .

He frowned. Here was an arid forenoon as imagination went. A seasoned plagiarist by this, he opened a book which lay upon the table among many others and duly found the chapter entitled "Of the Cannibals."

"So, so!" he said aloud. "'It is a nation, would I answer Plato, that has no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters—.'" And with that he sat about reshaping Montaigne's conceptions of Utopia into verse. He wrote—while his left hand held the book flat—as orderly as any county clerk might do in the recordance of a deed of sale.

Midcourse in larceny, he looked up from his writing. He saw a tall, dark lady who was regarding him half sorrowfully and half as in the grasp of some occult amusement. He said nothing. He released the tell-tale book. His eyebrows lifted, banteringly, before he rose.

He found it characteristic of her that she went silently to the table and compared the printed page with what he had just written. "So nowadays you have turned pickpocket of wit? My poet, you have altered."

He said: "Why, yes. When you broke off our friendship I paid you the expensive compliment of falling very ill. They thought that I would lie. They tell me even to-day I did not die. I almost question it." He shrugged. "And to-day I must continue to write plays, because I never learned any other trade. And so, at need, I pilfer." The topic did not seem much to concern him.

"Eh, and such plays!" the woman cried. "My poet, there was a time when you created men and women as glibly as Heaven does. Now you make sugar-candy dolls."

"The last comedies were not all I could have wished," he assented. "In fact, I got only some thirty pounds clear profit."

"There speaks the little tradesman I most hate I of all persons living!" the woman sighed. Now, as in impatience, she thrust back her traveling-hood and stood bare-headed.

Then she stayed silent—tall, extraordinarily pallid, and with dark, steady eyes. Their gaze by ordinary troubled you, as seeming to hint some knowledge to your belittlement. The playmaker remembered that. Now he, a reputable householder, was wondering what would be the upshot of this intrusion. His visitor, as he was perfectly aware, had little patience with such moments of life as could not be made dramatic . . . He was recollecting many trifles, now his mind ran upon old times . . . No, no, reflection assured him, to call her beautiful would be, and must always have been, an exaggeration; but to deny the exotic and somewhat sinister charm of her, even to-day, would be an absurdity.

She said, abruptly: "I do not think I ever loved you as women love men. You were too anxious to associate with fine folk, too eager to secure a patron—yes, and to get your profit

of him—and you were always ill-at-ease among us. Our youth is so long past, and we two are so altered that we, I think, may speak of its happenings now without any bitterness. I hated those sordid, petty traits. I raged at your incessant pretensions to gentility because I knew you to be so much more than a gentleman. Oh, it infuriated me—how long ago it was—to see you cringing to the Court blockheads, and running their errands, and smirkingly pocketing their money, and wheedling them into helping the new play to success. You complained I treated you like a lackey; it was not unnatural when of your own free will you played the lackey so assiduously."

He laughed. He had anatomized himself too frequently and with too much dispassion to overlook whatever tang of snobbishness might be in him; and, moreover, the charge thus tendered became in reality the speaker's apology, and hurt nobody's self esteem.

"Faith, I do not say you are altogether in the wrong," he assented. "They could be very useful to me—Pembroke, and Southampton, and those others—and so I endeavored to render my intimacy acceptable. It was my business as a poet to make my play as near perfect as I could; and this attended to, common-sense demanded of the theater manager that he derive as much money as was possible from its representation. What would you have? The man of letters, like the carpenter or the blacksmith, must live by the vending of his productions, not by the eating of them."

The woman waved this aside.

She paced the grass in meditation, the peach leaves brushing her proud head—caressingly, it seemed to him. Later she came nearer in a brand-new mood. She smiled now, and her voice was musical and thrilled with

wonder. "But what a poet Heaven had locked inside this little parasite! It used to puzzle me." She laughed, and ever so lightly. "Eh, and did you never understand why by preference I talked with you at evening from my balcony? It was because I could forget you then entirely. There was only a voice in the dark. There was a sorcerer at whose bidding words trooped like a conclave of emperors, and now sang like a bevy of linnets. And wit and fancy and high aspirations and my love—because I knew then that your love for me was splendid and divine—these also were my sorcerer's potent allies. I understood then how glad and awed were those fabulous Greekish queens when a god wooed them. Yes, then I understood. How long ago it seems!"

"Yes, yes," he sighed. "In that full-blooded season was Guenevere a lass, I think, and Charlemagne was not yet in breeches."

"And when there was a new play enacted I was glad. For it was our play, that you and I had polished the last line of yesterday, and all these people wept and laughed because of what we had done. And I was proud—" The lady shrugged impatiently. "Proud, did I say? And glad? That attests how woefully I fall short of you, my poet. You would have found some magic phrase to make that ancient glory articulate, I know. Yet—did I ever love you? I do not know that. I only know I sometimes fear you robbed me of the power of loving any other man."

"I must remind you," he cried, whimsically, "that a burnt child dreads even to talk of fire."

Her response was a friendly nod. She came yet nearer. "What," she demanded, and her smile was elfish, "what if I had lied to you? What if I wanted you to plead with me as in the old time?"

He said: "Until now you were only a woman. Oh, and now, my dear, you are Love. You are Youth. You are Comprehension. You are all that I have lost and hunger for. Here in this abominable village, there is no one who understands—not even those who are more dear to me than you are. I know. I only spoil good paper which might otherwise be profitably used to wrap herrings in, they think. They give me ink and a pen just as they would give toys to a child who squalled for them too obstinately. And Poesy is a thrifty oracle with no words to waste upon the deaf, however loudly her interpreter cry out to her. Oh, I have hungered for you, my proud dark lady!" the playmaker said.

Afterward they stood quite silent. She was not unmoved by his outcry; and for this very reason was obscurely vexed by the reflection that it would be the essay of a braver man to remedy, rather than to lament, his circumstances. And then the moment's rapture failed him.

"I am a sorry fool," he said; and lightly he ran on: "You are a skilful witch. Yet you have raised the ghost of an old madness to no purpose. You seek a master-poet? You will find none here. Perhaps I was one once. But most of us are poets of one sort or another when we love. Do you not understand? To-day I do not love you any more than I do Hecuba. Is it not strange that I should tell you this and not be moved at all? Is it not laughable that we should stand here at the last, two feet apart as things physical go, and be as profoundly severed as if an ocean tumbled between us?"

He fell to walking to and fro, his hands behind his back. She waited, used as she was to his unstable temperament, a trifle puzzled. Presently he spoke:

"There was a time when a master-

poet was needed. He was found—nay, rather made. Fate hastily caught up a man not very different from the run of men—one with a taste for stringing phrases and with a comedy or so to his discredit. Fate merely bid him love a headstrong child newly released from the nursery."

"We know her well enough," she said. "The girl was faithless, and tyrannous, and proud, and coquettish, and unworthy, and false, and inconstant. She was black as hell and dark as night in both her person and her living. You were not niggardly of vituperation."

And he grimaced. "Faith," he replied, "but sonnets are a more natural form of expression than affidavits, and they are made effective by compliance with different rules. I find no flagrant fault with you today. You were a child of seventeen, the darling of a noble house, and an actor—yes, and not even a preëminent actor—a gross, poor posturing vagabond, just twice your age, presumed to love you. What child would not amuse herself with such engaging toys? Vivacity and prettiness and cruelty are the most ordinary attributes of kittenhood. So you amused yourself. And I submitted with clear eyes, because I could not help it. Yes, I who am by nature not disposed to underestimate my personal importance—I submitted, because your mockery was more desirable than the adoration of any other woman. And all this helped to make a master-poet of me. Eh, why not, when such monstrous passions spoke through me—as if some implacable god elected to play godlike music on a flimsy lute? And I made admirable plays. Why not, when there was no tragedy more poignant than mine?—and where in any comedy was any figure one-half as ludicrous as mine? So Fate gained her end."

He was a paunchy, inconsiderable little man. By ordinary his elongated features and high, bald forehead loaned him an aspect of serene and axiom-based wisdom, much as we see him in his portraits; but now his countenance was flushed and mobile. Odd passions played about it, as when on a sullen night in August summer lightnings flicker and merge.

His voice had found another cadence. "But Fate was not entirely ruthless. Fate bade the child become a woman, and so grow tired of all her childhood's playthings. This was after a long while, as we estimate happenings . . . I suffered then. Yes, I went down to the doors of death, as people say, in my long illness. But that crude, corporal fever had a providential thievishness; and not content with stripping me of health and strength—not satisfied with pilfering inventiveness and any strong hunger to create—why, that insatiable fever even robbed me of my insanity. I lived. I was only a broken instrument flung by because the implacable god had wearied of playing. I would give forth no more heart-wringing music, for the musician had departed. And I still lived—I, the stout little tradesman whom you loathed. Yes, that tradesman scrambled through these evils, somehow, and came out still able to word adequately all such imaginings as could be devised by his natural abilities. But he transmitted no more heart-wringing music."

She said, "You lie!"

He said, "I thank Heaven daily that I do not." He spoke the truth. She knew it, and her heart was all rebellion.

Indefatigable birds sang through the following hush. A wholesome and temperate breeze caressed these silent people. Bees that would die to-morrow hummed about them tirelessly.

Then the poet said: "I loved you; and you did not love me. It is the most commonplace of tragedies, the heart of every man alive has been wounded in this identical fashion. A master-poet is only that wounded man—among so many other wounded men—who perversely augments his agony, and utilizes his wound as an inkwell. Presently time scars the wound for him, as time does for all the others. He does not suffer any longer. No, and such relief is a clear gain; but none the less he must henceforward write with ordinary ink such as the lawyers use."

"I should have been the man," the woman cried. "Had I been sure of fame, could I have known those raptures when you used to gabble immortal phrases like a stammering infant, I would have paid the price without all this whimpering."

"Faith, and I think you would have," he assented. "There is the difference. At bottom I am a creature of the most moderate aspirations, as you always complained; and for my part, Fate must in reason demand her applause of posterity rather than of me. For I regret the un-lived life that I was meant for—the comfortable level life of little happenings which all my school-fellows have passed through in a stolid drove. I was equipped to live that life with relish, and that life only; and it was denied me. It was demolished in order that a book or two be made out of its wreckage."

She said, with half-shut eyes: "There is a woman at the bottom of all this." And how he laughed!

"Did I not say you were a witch? Why, most assuredly there is."

He motioned with his left hand. Some hundred yards away a young man, who was carrying two logs toward New Place, had paused to rest. A girl was with him. Now laughingly she was pretending to assist

the porter in lifting his burden. It was a quaintly pretty vignette, as framed by the peach-leaves, because those two young people were so merry and so candidly in love. A symbolist might have wrung some pathos out of the girl's desire to aid, as set against her fond inadequacy; and the attendant playwright made note of it.

"Well, well!" he said; "Young Quiney is a so-so choice, since women must necessarily condescend to intermarrying with men. But he is far from worthy of her. Tell me, now, was there ever a rarer piece of beauty?"

"The wench is not ill-favored," was her unenthusiastic answer. "So!—but who is she?"

He replied. "She is my daughter. Yonder you see my latter muse for whose dear sake I spin romances. I do not mean that she takes any lively interest in them. That is not to be expected, since she cannot read or write. Ask her about the poet we were discussing, and I very much fear Judith will bluntly inform you she cannot tell a B from a bull's foot. But one must have a muse of some sort or another; and so I write about the world as she sees it. My Judith finds this world an eminently pleasant place. It is full of laughter and kindness—for could Herod be unkind to her?—and it is largely populated by ardent young fellows who are intended chiefly to be twisted about your fingers; and it is illuminated by sunlight whose real purpose is to show how pretty your hair is. And if affairs go badly for awhile, and you have done nothing very wrong—why, of course, Heaven will soon straighten out matters satisfactorily. For nothing that happens to us can possibly be anything except a benefit, because God orders all happenings, and God loves us. There you have Judith's creed; and upon my

word, I believe there is a great deal to be said for it."

"And this is you," she cried—"you who wrote of Troilus and Timon!"

"I lived all that," he replied—"I lived it, and so for a long while I believed in the existence of wickedness. To-day I have lost many illusions, madam, and that ranks among them. I never knew a wicked person. I doubt if anybody ever did. Undoubtedly shortsighted people exist who have floundered into ill-doing; but it proves always to have been on account of either cowardice or folly, and never because of malevolence; and in consequence, their sorry pickle should demand commiseration far more loudly than our blame. In short, I find humanity to be both a weaker and a better-meaning race than I had suspected. And so, I make what you call 'sugar candy dolls,' because I very potently believe that all of us are sweet at heart. Oh no! men lack an innate aptitude for sinning; and at worst, we frenziedly attempt our misdemeanors just as a sheep retaliates on its pursuers. This much, at least, has Judith taught me."

The woman murmured: "Eh, you are luckier than I. I had a son. He was borne of my anguish, he was fed and tended by me, and he was dependent on me in all things." She said, with a half-sob, "My poet, he was so little and so helpless! Now he is dead."

"My dear, my dear!" he cried, and he took both her hands. "I also had a son. He would have been a man by this."

They stood thus for awhile. And then he smiled.

"I ask your pardon. I had forgotten that you hate to touch my hands. I know—they are too moist and flabby. I always knew that you thought that. Well! Hamlet died. I grieved. That is a trivial thing to

say. But you also have seen your own flesh lying in a coffin so small that even my soft hands could lift it. So you will comprehend. To-day I find that the roughest winds abate with time. Hatred and self-seeking and mischance and, above all, the frailties innate in us—these buffet us for awhile, and we are puzzled, and we demand of God, as Job did, why is this permitted? And then as the hair dwindles, the wit grows."

"Oh, yes, with age we take a slackening hold upon events; we let all happenings go by more lightly; and we even concede the universe not to be under any actual bond to be intelligible. Yes, that is true. But is it gain, my poet? for I had thought it to be loss."

"With age we gain the priceless certainty that sorrow and injustice are ephemeral. *Solvitur ambulando*, my dear—I have attested this merely by living long enough. I, like any other man of my years, have in my day known more or less every grief which the world breeds; and each maddened me in turn, as each was duly salved by time; so that to-day their ravages vex me no more than do the bee-stings I got when I was an urchin. To-day I grant the world to be composed of muck and sunshine intermingled; but, upon the whole, I find the sunshine more pleasant to look at and—greedily, because my time for sightseeing is not very long—I stare at it. And I hold Judith's creed to be the best of all imaginable creeds." He laughed at this season and fell into a lighter tone. "Do I preach like a little conventicle-attending tradesman? Faith, you must remember that when I talk gravely Judith listens as if it were an oracle discoursing. For Judith loves me as the wisest and the best of men. I protest her adoration frightens me.

What if she were to find me out?"

"I loved what was divine in you," the woman answered.

"Oddly enough, that is the perfect truth! And when what was divine in me had burned a sufficiency of incense to your vanity, your vanity's owner drove off in a fine coach and left me to die in a garret. Then Judith came. Then Judith nursed and tended and caressed me—and Judith only in all the world—as once you did that boy you spoke of. Ah, madam, and does not sorrow sometimes lie awake o' nights in the bed of that child? and sometimes walk with you by day and clasp your hand—much as his tiny hand did once, so trustingly, so like the clutching of a vine—and beg you never to love anything save sorrow? And do you wholeheartedly love those other women's boys—who did not die? Yes, I remember. Judith, too, remembered. I was her father, for all that I had forsaken my family to dance insane attendance on a fine Court lady. So Judith came. And Judith did not ask, but gave, what was divine."

"You are unfair," she cried. "Oh, you are cruel, you juggle words. I never hated you till this. Remember that I loved my boy."

He said: "Yes, I am cruel. But you had mirth and beauty once, and I had only love and a vocabulary. Who then more flagrantly abused the gifts God gave? And why should I not be cruel to you, who made a master-poet of me for your recreation? Lord, what a deal of ruined life it takes to make a little art! Yes, yes, I know. Under old oaks lovers will mouth my verses, and the acorns are not yet shaped from which those oaks will spring. My adoration and your perfidy, all that I have suffered, all that I have failed in even, has gone toward the building of an enduring monument. All

these will be immortal, because youth is immortal, and youth delights in demanding explanations of infinity. And only to this end I have suffered and have catalogued the ravings of a perverse disease which has robbed my life of all the normal privileges of life as flame shrivels hair from the arm—that young fools such as I was once might be pleased to murder my rhetoric, and scribblers parody me in their fictions, and school-boys guess at the date of my death!" This he said with more than ordinary animation; and then he shook his head. "There is a leaven," he said—"there is a leaven even in your smuggest and most inconsiderable tradesman."

She answered, with a wistful smile: "I, too, regret my poet. And just now you are more like him—"

"Faith, but he was really a poet—or, at least, at times—?"

"'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme—'"

"Dear, dear!" he said, in petulant vexation; "how horribly emotion botches verse. That clash of sibilants is both harsh and ungrammatical. *Shall* should be changed to *will*." And at that the woman sighed.

"Very unfeignedly I regret my poet," she said—"my poet, who was unhappy and unreasonable, because I was not always wise or kind, or even just. And I did not know until to-day how much I loved my poet. Yes, I know now I loved him. I must go now. I would I had not come."

Then, standing face to face, he cried, "Eh, madam, and what if I also have lied to you? Our work is done; what more is there to say?"

"Nothing," she answered—"nothing. Not even for you, who are a master-smith of words to-day and nothing more."



"I?" he replied. "Do you so little emulate a higher example that even for a moment you consider me?"

She did not answer.

When she had gone, the playmaker sat for a long while in meditation; and then smilingly he took up his pen. He was bound for "an uninhabited island" where all disasters ended in a happy climax.

"So, so!" he was declaiming, later on; "*We, too, are kin to dreams and visions; and our little life is gilded by such faint and cloud-wrapped suns*—only, that needs a homelier touch. Rather, let us say, *We are such stuff as dreams are made on*—oh, good, good!—Now to pad out the line. . . . In any event, the Bermudas are a seasonable topic. Now here, instead of *thickly-templed India*, suppose we write *the still-vexed Bermoothes*—good, good! It fits in well enough . . ."

And so in clerkly fashion he set

about the accomplishment of his stint of labor in time for dinner. A competent workman is not disastrously upset by interruption; and, indeed, he found the notion of surprising Judith with an unlooked-for trinket or so to be at first a very efficacious spur to composition.

And presently the strong joy of creating kindled in him, and phrase flowed abreast with thought, and the playmaker wrote fluently and surely to an accompaniment of contented ejaculations. He regretted nothing, he would not now have laid aside his pen to take up a scepter. For surely—he would have said—to live untroubled, and weave beautiful and winsome dreams is the most desirable of human fates. But he did not consciously think of this, because he was midcourse in the evoking of a mimic tempest which, having purged its victims of unkindliness and error, aimed (in the end) only to sink into an amiable calm.

*And so enough of this "little tradesman" and his splendid plagiaries. There was another man—great poet he was named in his own day—of whose body Fortune had made cruel sport and whose mind became, therefore, the abiding place of icy wit and whose heart knew only the nice phrase. Of what human passions he felt none knew, perhaps not even himself; and more man of letters than man, he was considered for the most part. And yet, upon a time, a woman stripped the poet from him, showing him that, loving mightily, he was for the moment but human. Of this we shall read next month in "A Brown Woman."*

