

BRANCH CABELL

*THE NIGHTMARE
HAS TRIPLETS*

An Author's Note on SMIRE

Publisher's Note

IT IS with pardonable pride that we announce the new book by Branch Cabell under our imprint. SMIRE is to be published on March 26th, at \$2.50. This "Author's Note" explains the genesis of the book—a work of extraordinary beauty and uniqueness—a story as full of allusion and curious loveliness as *Jurgen* itself. Also this note integrates SMIRE with SMIRT and SMITH, the two novels which precede it in the present series.

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THE NIGHTMARE HAS TRIPLETS

An Author's Note on SMIRE

by BRANCH CABELL

TO BEGIN ROUNDABOUT, with a most cogent truism, through sleep only may we hope to find an existence not ever troubled by weariness. Through sleep alone can we enter into dreams. And in dreamland, to the common experience of all humankind, the most watery-spirited of us may come to live passionately—faring hand in glove, as it were, with the miraculous, the fervent, and the heroic, now that, for a grateful interregnum, time and time's stolid offspring, whom we name common-sense, have abdicated their tyrannies.

For in dreamland one lives unchronologically. The squandered past is revived, reviving with it its most noble and lovely dead, that superior race who flourished during our youthfulness, and now they are no longer estranged, but become all-forgiving when we reveal to them—with an unchecked and how lively eloquence!—everything which our prudence or youth's bashfulness, or it may be our duty, had forbidden. They listen fondly, even with some slight traces of reverence. Our deceased kindred and our lost loves appreciate in dreamland, for the first time, our true virtues, our superb qualities. And besides that, from out of the barred future, delicately, like elfin jail-breakers, steal yet other fine comrades, in the form of our more unlikely but resplendent hopes realized; whereas the present tends toward various kindly felonies, through bribing off the day's bitterness or defeat, and hiring for every mortal trouble an assassin, with frail fairy gold.

So we fare hand in glove, as it were, with the miraculous, the fervent, and the heroic. All is high-hearted, all is quite pleasant, while it lasts. Then morning (as, rather possibly, you may have noticed) dispels every one of these agreeabilities, post-haste, with a petulant chirping of half-awakened birds or, in more urban circumstances, with the sedate hoof-beats of the local milk-wagon. Time and common-sense return to us, terrorizingly. Yet again do they establish over prostrate, still imbedded mankind their drab rule.

Well, and thereafter, for some sixteen relatively unremunerative hours, we must put by what we call our dreams. Though, indeed, it is a bit vaingloriously—may plain reason protest, at this point—that we make bold to describe any one of these dreams as “ours.” Into dreamland goes every sleeper as an improved and engrandized version of his everyday self. He becomes a creature very little resembling his wife’s major disappointment in life, now that sleep graces him with new powers, with new and thitherto unparalleled turns of speech, with a new intrepidity, and with new gifts of logic. Your personality in a dream, should you but reflect upon this matter, is not at all your more humdrum day-lit personality. Through sleep’s gracious editing, you are now as different from the person who lies in your bed as is any one of your superb comrades in dreamland. It is thus, by all mundane rules, not really “you” that hold traffic with the affairs of your dream. These somnial transactions do not involve the terrestrial “you” one way or the other; and so, by no sound logician could be described as “yours.”

—Which quite plainly is nonsense, you will remark. And I agree with you. That is just my point. My point—nay, my truism—is that, logic or no logic, we know, indissuadably, that our dreams are indeed ours, and ours also in a sense more dear and more deep than are the enforced compromises of our flesh-and-blood living.

Now this is a pure heritage of instinctive knowledge (submits the truly sound logician) from which one cannot but infer that in dreamland alone do we become our true selves, those selves of whom our workaday namesakes are a cramped parody. And

it shows (the aforesaid, rare, acute logician will go on to deduce) that in our dreams alone do we actually have any existence. We live only, in any adequate sense of that verb (he will remark), after our discarded, gross flesh-and-blood caricatures have been huddled safely abed. And furthermore (thus he will perorate, looking toward us nocturnal demi-gods with some unavoidable awed admiration), furthermore we deserve our historian, one who will treat of our superhuman everynight exploits with an unstinted, a fearless, and a befitting naturalism. That is my second point.

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It is because of such cogent truisms that, in the series of books of which *Smire* is the final volume, I have labored faithfully to extend into mature dreaming the unrivalled naturalism of Lewis Carroll. That prolegomenon seems, as it were, to be a concession demanded by honesty; and, in its turn, demanding a paragraph or so to explain it.

In 1929, then, during the revising of *The Cream of the Jest* into its definitive version, the thought occurred to the writer of *The Cream of the Jest* that, with one striking exception, nobody had as yet published a dream-story combining any considerable length with any considerable pretence to veracity. Here and there you found a short story which, in its stunted way, stayed veracious enough. Even in *The Cream of the Jest* you noted, among forty chapters, four chapters which seemed veracious. But Lewis Carroll alone of all humankind appeared to have written books which dealt, and which dealt only, with the true stuff of dreams; which covered with completeness the course of a normal dream; and which at every instant progressed, just as by ordinary a dream does progress, under the local regulations of dreamland.

In *The Cream of the Jest* you considered—a bit ruefully—a novel builded about the dreams of a novelist. But you considered, also, the real issue dodged, and dodged doubly, by the facts: (a) that the dreams of Felix Kennaston were indicated by extracts or summaries; and (b) that these dreams were induced by extraneous means, perhaps more or less magical. Turning

thence to *The High Place*, to *Jurgen*, to *Figures of Earth*, and to yet other volumes emanating at diverse periods from the same typewriter, you discovered, in very ample quantity, the dream which this or the other magic had induced beyond question; and which (in consequence of a reason well known to all students of goetia) conformed to the logic, and to the touchstones, of a person who is awake. None of these volumes recorded any dream from the authentic, the wholly familiar, standpoint of a normal dreamer. And it seemed odd that, after so much year-long traffic with dreams, the author of the *Biography of the Life of Manuel* had never once dealt, thoroughly, with any normal species of dream.

Odder still seemed the fact that, when you came to think of it, there did not appear to exist in American literature, whether in its maturity or during its childhood in England, any full-length dream-story which obeyed the actual and well-known laws of a normal dream—with the ever-memorable exception of the two *Alice* books by Lewis Carroll. These books alone did preserve the peculiar, the unremittent movement of a normal dream, and the peculiar logic of a normal dream, and the peculiar legerdemain through which the people one meets, or the places visited, in a normal dream, are enabled unostentatiously to take visible form or to vanish, quite naturally, without provoking in the beholder's mind any element of surprise; just as these books preserved, too, the ever-present knowledge, common to many dreamers, that, after all, they are dreaming.

But I forbear to particularize the true somnial touch with which matters are handled by Lewis Carroll. My point here is that, in 1929, these two books remained inexplicably unfellowed in English, as the sole known examples—so I believed—of an elaborate and unflinching naturalism applied to the lands beyond common-sense.

Yet the exact must file an objection. Alice smells pepper in Wonderland, she smells the "scented rushes" in Looking-Glass Land; and, upon several occasions, Alice partakes of food, and of physic also—reducing needfully her size almost at outset, as

you will remember, by means of an unusual medicine which had “a sort of mixed flavor of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy and hot buttered toast.”

Such fantasies merely grieve the judicious. But the precisian they madden, because, throughout every land beyond common-sense into which human beings have as yet entered, it is a known fact that in no dream not induced by black magic or by gray magic did any dreamer ever smell or taste anything. So this one blotting exception to the scientific exactness of Lewis Carroll must be recorded here—with the glad supplement that in every other important respect one finds his books to be triumphs in naturalism, with which the most admired novels of George Moore, or of Zola, or of Dreiser, let us say, cannot easily be compared.

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Returning to *The Cream of the Jest*, it seemed increasingly needful to the author of *The Cream of the Jest*, during the months which he gave over to revising *The Cream of the Jest*, that some soothsayer other than Lewis Carroll should narrate a full-length dream, at full length, realistically. The trend of the time, one reflected, stayed definitely averse from any form of too timid restraint such as continued to enslave our creative writers. I mean, of course, that, in giving us the stark, the grim, and the sex-obsessed “truth” about man’s life during his wide-awake hours, our professed realists had at all times restricted their tediousness to some two-thirds of human existence—without ever daring, it would seem, to venture beyond that rather vulgar fraction. All their novels displayed a cowed devotion to insomnia.

The eight hours, more or less, which every human being devotes to sleep appeared to repel the professed realist; to bother him, in some obscure fashion; and to be a theme which no realist cared to handle. Dreams had been analyzed and interpreted, *ad*, as the learned say, *infinitum*, and even, the impatient append, *ad nauseam*; but never since 1871 had any British or American writer dealt with any complete and convincing dream convincingly and completely.

All this, too, in face of the plain fact that each normal person spends one-third of his normal existence in sleep, during which (according at least to such eminent authorities as Kant, Leibnitz, Descartes, and yet other reputable philosophers) every sleeper dreams continuously; and so, for eight hours *per noctem*, lives among unterrestrial surroundings and exercises unearthly powers. Yet Lewis Carroll alone of our better-known realists had considered this huge field, this entire third of human life, with any seriousness or any veracity. And even this great pioneer had confined his explorings to the south temperate zone, as it were, in the callow, the sexless, dreams of a child.

It followed that nowhere in English prose literature was an adult dream depicted with realism; and that some thirty-three per cent. of human experience remained untouched by any living creative writer at all truthfully. Since Bunyan's time there had been an abundance of books which purported to record dreams; but, thus far, only two of these books had tried honestly to obey the conditions of dreamland, wherein most human beings pass a third of their lives.

It really did seem a default which ought to be remedied.

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Here, in *The Cream of the Jest*, glimmered a fair starting point for that remedying. Only, my protagonist must not, of course, be a professional writer, because caution whispered that in yet another volume to present the dreamer as one who lived as a *littérateur* during his waking hours, would make it difficult for dullards to see in the proposed book anything save a re-writing of *The Cream of the Jest*. He could as easily be a painter, said caution, or, perhaps better still, a professional book-reviewer; though indeed, for that matter, without any large difficulty, he could be made a stock broker, or a minister of the Christian gospel (a notion with some fine possibilities), or a merchant, or a lawyer, or, yet more simply, a person of independent means. Such persons were still about during the first half of 1929. In brief, the sole needs of my protagonist, as the tale shiftingly took form to the back of my thoughts, in 1929,

seemed a fair allowance of literacy, and of imagination, and of his own theories about creative art—and of a loquaciousness also.

Ah, but if—as experience forthwith assured me—but if I did make my protagonist a professional writer, then instantly my original would be suspect. No dullard anywhere would be able, quite, to avoid the belief I was writing about myself; and as a further, most salutary consequence, no dullard would fail to be rather cordially irritated. (It is for this reason, I remark in passing, that I always incline to make of my protagonist a writer, or at the very least a potential writer, just as I labor toward much the same end when I hyphenate Richmond-in-Virginia.) Thus did experience woo me, outwhispering caution; and sturdily prompting me not to remit the pleasures promised by a continuance in what the obtuse must consider egotism. Well! and inasmuch as we know experience to be the best teacher, to the sardonic voice of experience I listened, meltingly.

So, then, did experience lead me to decide that my protagonist might most pleasurably be made a professional writer, with loquacious tendencies. —Whereafter this same person came closer toward me, solidifying, a little by a little, as it were, during his slow emergence from out of that shadowy realm in which the as yet uncreated characters of fiction abide restively; his traits took form; he became, in brief, the Peripatetic Episcopalian; and he revealed to me, first of all, that Smirt and Smith and Smire were his triple names, his inevitable epithets, his *mots justes*. After that, he revealed the incidents of his long dreaming, just as clearly as (but not a jot clearer than) it had been revealed to him.

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He revealed also, when I came to convert his dreaming into words and sentences and punctuation marks, an unpliant obstinacy. “But that,” he would repeat, parrot-like, whensoever I attempted to touch up, a bit improvingly, his revealings, “that is not the way it was.” And there was no doing anything whatever with the man until I had returned meekly to his far

less attractive version of the affair in hand. Throughout virtually all the supernal doings of Smirt, and throughout the latter part of Smire's questing (since for these passages he was perforce my sole authority), he in this fashion caused me persistent trouble.

Nevertheless, from such word-of-mouth material did I manage, in 1931, to begin the tale of his dreaming, in *Smirt*; and so during the first book about the Peripatetic Episcopalian I was led, by Arachne, through a small cobweb-covered gate of horn, into that special planet fated to be reorganized out-of-hand by Smirt's literary influence. A number of matters were thus changed fundamentally; huge difficulties were made lighter, by dozens and by scores; whilst my future progress became more smooth and less cluttered: all through this windfall which had increased, so generously, my sources of knowledge. For need I explain that, when I had once got into the planet which the Seven Stewards remodelled under Smirt's supervision, I was not any longer dependent upon what my friend chose, or what he declined, to communicate, now that, to me likewise, the lands beyond common-sense had been laid open?

My question is rhetorical. None might answer my question without presupposing your complete lack of common intelligence; and to wanton in any such incivility is very far out of the orbit of my purpose. You, in plain logic, and quite instantly, must see that I could now appraise the bright flanks, the faëry seas, the magic-haunted continents, the fabulous kingdoms, and the resplendent contents in general, of this planet, not merely by the reports (perhaps unavoidably biassed) of its demiurge, but through the unprejudiced aid of my own private faculties, once I was able in person to visit these dream-engendered places, and to behold them precisely as they had been shaped, and made multi-colored, and left populous, under Smirt's divine influence, by the Seven Stewards of Heaven. I could get at first hand a reliable medley of information from the surviving inhabitants of the lands beyond common-sense. But, what was far more important, as went my immediate needs, I could now consult their most ancient traditions, their folk-lore, their scholastic labors, and their theological speculations, concerning

their Creator; it having been permitted me in this way to amplify my history of his exploits.

One remained, to be sure, in my friend's dreaming, of which all these matters were a product—but with the large difference that through his dreaming he had set in action, and he had builded so permanently as to outlast his own omnipotence, a world which still had its existence; and through the by-paths of which he, that had been its demiurge, must henceforward tread, somewhat furtively, as a mere demi-god, not unsuspectingly regarded, whose whims in this world were supreme no longer.

And besides that, my fallen friend, in his rôle as Lord of the Forest, at first seemed to be dreaming, a whit discursively, about events in which he himself had no share. This feature puzzled me when, as yet subject to the almsgiving of his egotism, I began to write out, in *Smith*, the second book of the epic of the Peripatetic Episcopalian. Then, by-and-by, I understood. I saw (as, apparently, the Lord of the Forest did not ever see) that the four sons whom he fetched to his sylvan kingdom were but four aspects of himself. As Smirt, unknowingly perhaps, he had personified his own stubborn wilfulness, his own blind self-complacency, his own inveterate poeticizing, and his own pig-headed pedantry, in these four of his offspring—or, to be more precise, the offspring of his dreaming—whom severally he elected to call Volmar, and Elair, and Clitandre, and Little Smirt. Each one of these four adventurers I now noted to be, at bottom, but a slightly distorted copy of the adventurer in chief, of the Master of Gods, with one special feature especially emphasized.

In fine, this Supreme Being had followed the usual divine routine of creating men in his own image. So did it still remain true that (as Smirt himself had observed, during the genesis of his privately owned planet), “everywhither rode abridged likenesses of Smirt upon magnificent quests; and each one of these secondary Smirts was speaking the most polished diction, and was doing any number of impossible things, in the lands beyond common-sense.”

And so, likewise, did I perceive that the exalted bland personage whose dreaming I commemorated did but continue to dream about his own doings and his own endurances, under this or the other alias. The accustomed dietary of his egoism was being reflavored with a new sauce. Such was the sole altering.

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When I came to record, in *Smire*, the third phase of his dreaming, I then pointed out that, as go the general plan and the æsthetic standards of this series of books as a whole, you may find these matters to have been outlined (albeit with a Smirean tinge), as tersely as painstaking could well manage, in the twenty-fourth chapter of *Smire*. This remark I repeat here, because it is really essential.

What more immediately touches my immediate purpose, however, is the fact that in compiling this third book about the Peripatetic Episcopalian, I continued to avail myself of the annals of the lands beyond common-sense, during the while that I completed my chronicle of the decreed progress which is made by every divine being. And I then attempted also to satisfy my curiosity as to the extremely important problem, What is the status of humankind during that third of our existence which we pass in dreamland?

This is a question to which the philosophers, a number of scientists, and indeed one or two of the more liberal politicians, of the lands beyond common-sense have devoted a not inconsiderable amount of study, upon the off-chance that human beings might in some way be made useful. Yet have these patient students labored always without reaching any general agreement. By one school of philosophy—by the Rationalists—it is held that our race must necessarily be a by-product of the more perturbed dreams of the people of dreamland, inasmuch as the recorded history and the current doings of humankind (which these Rationalists as yet study nightly, with amazed interest) are simply not possible. And to that contention, of course, no reply can be made within the narrow fields of pure reason. Nevertheless, there are not lacking in dreamland those

outmoded mystics who to every sort of sane argument answer, *Credo quia impossibile est*. And this minority as yet clings, half shamefacedly and with a diminishing ardor, to the planet's ancient faith that, in spite of logic, and just as the rustic tribes of Branlon relate, human beings do truly exist; that they are living organisms as actual as a ghost or a dragon; and that, over and over again, it is permitted these rather repulsive and muddle-headed, frail flesh-and-blood monsters to come into the lands beyond common-sense as weird visitants.

In brief, the question may be described as technically open, so far as the people of dreamland are concerned: but their faith in mankind remains, at best, an obsolescent and a concededly far-fetched hypothesis.

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I must record here the regret of my protagonist that, throughout the course of his dreaming, he lacked not merely the ability to smell or to taste anything. His powers of vision also were circumscribed, indescribably. Oh, but yes, he saw everything clearly enough, so far as went practical needs. It was only that a sort of mistiness pervaded matters, driftingly, unpredictably. And besides, at times, one or another visual detail would seize on his attention, obsessing it, somewhat as though, from the indefinite mistings, which were like an all-shrouding but very thin fog, this particular detail—a white eyebrow, it might be, or a red note-book possibly, or the sleek, black-bordered face of a clock, or perhaps the steel tip of a spear, or the soiled crease in a purple tunic—had been picked out by a flashlight. In consequence, you did not ever obtain a leisured and complete view of any person or object or place.

It sounds unimportant enough, this vague hindrance. Yet it imposed upon my friend's chronicler, so I soon found, a limitation which debarred the higher reaches of picturesque writing, because upon no occasion had my protagonist seen quite so much of anything as would afford me the material for a handsomely rhetorical describing of it. You may perhaps note, as one result of this stumbling block, that all three of the

books about the Peripatetic Episcopalian have been written, throughout, in somewhat the dry and homespun and unaffected style of a scientific thesis, which, in dealing with oneirology, must confine itself to unearthly matters of fact, without flaunting any repolished trinkets of "fine writing." Although there was no noticed abatement in my friend's customary powers of hearing and of touch, yet three of his senses were as though drugged—two of them completely, and the other in part—and his reports to me concerning dreamland were thus maimed.

Moreover, he retained in his dreaming no terrene perception of time. For the convenience of the reader I have suggested here and there a supposed interval of time, just as I have philanthropically divided each book about the Peripatetic Episcopalian into chapters, to afford breathing spells. Yet here again has my friend remarked dubiously, "But that is not the way it was." For in point of fact, he declares, there was no interval. Everything happened, as it were, simultaneously, or at least almost simultaneously, now that events, and many persons too, merged swiftly and unaccountably, but quite naturally, into yet other events or yet other persons; so that the action of his three-faceted dreaming could not really be thought about as coincident with any arithmeticable clock-ticks. It had no alliance with time's passing, as we estimate such affairs upon Earth.

There seemed, insomuch as my reporting dreamer could phrase the result, to be no important difference between the length of a year and the length of a vowel and the length of a yardstick. Chronology had become a matter which (if vaguely perturbing) was unintimate and beyond comprehension. For he did not any more travel through time, advancing from one instant to another instant. Instead (so nearly as you could put it), time was now travelling about him—aloofly, and moving circuitously, rather than either forward or backward—at a desultory but broad-minded gait which allowed the claims of every known era to be regarded as a dreamer's contemporary. And space also became nomadic. Thus he did not often go to any place in his dreaming, nor did he need to, for the sufficing reason that the place—swiftly and unaccountably, but most

naturally—came to him. Just somehow, he was already there. He had severed, in brief, all his day-lit relations with time and space; and retained no hidebound, no utterly clear, conception of either.

It now, to cite but one instance from the first part of his dreaming, appeared wholly natural that, in a not quite tangible palace builded out of the finer fabrics of sunset, Charlemagne and Fionn Mac Uail and Prester John and Haroun Al Raschid and Arthur Pendragon should at the same instant be presiding each over the fantastical glories of his own unique entourage, in this gleaming pleasure house which, subject only to your personal choice, graced Aachen or Tara of the Kings or Susa or Bagdad or Carleon upon Usk. Nor was this all. That ever, during the aberrations of your waking hours, for some reason or another, this circumstance might have seemed out of the ordinary, was a notion which you recalled with serene wonder, now that this circumstance had to be granted as a matter of unarguable, everynight fact, which you, with your own personal eyes and ears, were observing in unsurprised approbation.

Throughout the varied course of my friend's dreaming, in short, the simultaneous presence of different places (as of different eras) aroused no marked sense of incongruity; but had become a phenomenon as self-evident and as unstartling as was the simultaneous presence of all ten of his fingers. So why, as you reasoned calmly, why, inasmuch as there were always five nimble fingers to each hand, should there not be five noble palaces to each place? Not even to the most obtuse sort of sleeper could this question appear other than rhetorical, in your dreaming.

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But I forbear to cite further the conditions of any normal dream. To all mankind these conditions are familiar. I say merely that in each book concerning the Peripatetic Episcopalian, I have tried to conform to every one of these conditions.

I remark likewise that to write truthfully about human

dreams is an enterprise which I would recommend to my fellow makers of reading-matter, because their continued timid avoidance of an entire third of every human life appears—to me, at any rate—a bit cowardly. Finally, I rejoice to have rectified, at least, and at howsoever long a last, my own delinquency in this sort of frank realism.

“Of realism,” I repeat, soberly, and in full consciousness that my remarks here may have misled you into the same grave error made by the nine spectres whom Smire met in Acheron. You may well think that here an absurd, out-of-date creature is merely telling you—yet again—that the dream is better than the reality.

And in that case, I can but reply, precisely as did the Peripatetic Episcopalian, toward the end of his long journey about the lands beyond common-sense—

“To the contrary, I am telling you that for humankind the dream is the one true reality.”

Richmond-in-Virginia

1931-1937