

BETWEEN FRIENDS

LETTERS OF
JAMES BRANCH CABELL
AND OTHERS



Edited by PADRAIC COLUM and
MARGARET FREEMAN CABELL



With an Introduction by Carl Van Vechten

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WITH AN

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For some weeks in the summer of 1919, Burton Rascoe had been writing to Cabell first about Rascoe's *Jurgen* manuscript, then the printer's copy, and finally the book in boards. "I spent most of Sunday reading my new manuscript of *Jurgen* with ever-increasing admiration. . . . Could you tell me what was the nucleus of this extraordinary book, what was the initial idea from which it grew, and something about its evolution? I am curious to know."

Rockbridge Alum Springs, Virginia
August 10, 1919

My dear Rascoe:

Well, very cordially do I hope that some day your collection of Jurgeniana will be extremely valuable. I am tempted to augment it, as you request, by a sort of private preface as to the book's evolution, but,

looking back, detect so many tiny tributaries as to defy cataloguing. . . . *Imprimis*, it was a year ago last March that I temporarily put aside my *Something about Eve* to write for Mencken the short story he requested and seemed to merit. I evolved then very much the same "Some Ladies and Jurgen" in imagination as eventually appeared in the *Smart Set*: wherein the devil offers Jurgen the three symbolic ladies Guenevere and Cleopatra and Helen, and the poet prefers, upon the whole, his prosaic wife. But as I wrote it out, I scented possibilities—how much more effective, for instance, it would be if Jurgen had previously known and loved and lost these women. Of course, that meant, to me, a dizain, with four tales already suggested: it would be out of space and time, of necessity, if Jurgen were to encounter these three who lived centuries apart. So, with my story still unwritten, I begin to plan the dizain, of ten short stories to be disposed of severally for much fine gold. Ah, but the Cleopatra episode! here I foresee myself heading straight for an imitation of *Aphrodite* and Louÿs' notion of life in Alexandria. Well, then, let us substitute the goddess herself in place of the Cleopatra who symbolizes her, and call the goddess—no, not Aphrodite, the Grecianisms must be reserved for the Helen part. I consider her other names, and am instantly captivated by the umlaut in Anaïtis. So my second heroine becomes Anaïtis, a moon goddess. But her lovers are solar legends—Why, to be sure, for does not Guenevere typify the spring, Anaïtis summer, and Helen in her Leukê avatar the autumn? I perceive that Jurgen is a solar legend, and inevitably spends the winter under-ground. There is the Hell episode postulated, then. So I make out my calendar, and find it 37 days short, since obviously the year must be rounded out. Where was Jurgen between 22 March and 30 April? The question answers itself, and I spy the chance to use that fine idea that has been in my mind for fifteen years or more, as to how Heaven was created.

I am getting on now, with my dizain lacking only three episodes—since the half-written magazine story has obviously split into an opening and an ending of a book. (That is, I thus far think it the ending.) And now I am wondering if there is not a chance at last for that other fine idea I could not ever find a place to work into—the going back to a definite moment in one's past— For what? — obviously for a woman, since Jurgen has by this time taken form as a person— What woman, though? — why, clearly the woman who in his youth represented the never quite attainable Helen. And she was Count Emmerich's second sister, whose existence I had postulated in *The Jest*, with the intention of using her in due time. I christen her Varvara, in general consonance with my Russian Koshchei, who I am beginning to perceive must be more than a mere devil if the book is to ascend— Yes, he must be the Demiurge, and God his creation— Then Koshchei must be rather stupid,

and not be bothering himself about Jurgen at all. I need another supernatural agent, some one more near to purely human affairs, to direct Jurgen's wanderings. My mind being already on Russian mythology, and the regaining of a lost day being involved, the Léschy who control the days present themselves, and I select Sereda for Jurgen to wheedle out of, of course, one of the Wednesdays when he was young. Another episode.

But this Varvara (no, nobody will be certain as to the pronunciation of Varvara: call her Dorothy)—will disappoint him, a little anyhow, if he goes back to the actual girl. Really to go back, he must return to the girl as she seemed to him, and himself be young again— But the point is already in my mind that, while Jurgen is to keep the youth that would come back to him with the replevined Wednesday, so far as his body goes, his mind is to remain middle-aged. So I grope to the ironic scheme of letting him seem to his ideal girl as he actually is, and be to her unrecognizable— Then he must, somehow, get rid of his false youth before his interview with Koshchei in the cave: that makes me the tenth episode— No, I still lack the machinery for getting him to the Garden: a centaur appears the handiest method of combining transportation and conversation. I think inevitably of Nessus, then of his shirt. Yes, something must be done with that shirt— And that episode must come first, while Jurgen is still middle-aged.

Well, there you are. That is about how the outline of the book came to me: and at this stage I went back to the *Smart Set* story and actually wrote it. Thereafter I set about writing my ten episodes (and found them resolutely determined not to be short stories, on any terms); and rewrote them; and put in here and there just anything which occurred to me, and changed this and altered that; and groped to that loathsome last chapter as the tale's inevitable ending. And almost last of all, I pivoted the whole thing upon the shadow and the shirt, which were almost the last things of all I thought of— So, you see, the book virtually wrote itself for

Yours faithfully,

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

Before the Cabells left for the Rockbridge Alum, a letter from Sinclair Lewis reached Dumbarton.