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VOODOOISM

By WILL W. NELSON

WHEN the savage negroes of Africa were first introduced into America as slaves, they brought with them a strange, weird form of ceremony known only to the savage tribes of the African jungles. It was not a religion, but a form of sorcery called voodooism.

Voodooism found its strongest adherents among the negroes of the Southland. As the southern negroes became more educated and enlightened, voodooism vanished to a great extent, but there are still some sections of the South where the negroes believe in and practice this strange doctrine today, just as their ancestors did in the jungles of Africa centuries ago, except perhaps in a more modified form. In the large southern cities the voodoo doctor still plies his trade, prospering from the ill-gotten fees received from the ignorant and the wicked.

Nowadays voodooism is generally called "conjuring," by the negroes of the South. It is a common occurrence now to hear a negro say: "I'll sho get de conjure man atta dat nigger," when he feels he has been ill treated by one of his own race. Or, when a negro is suffering from some ailment, "Dat nigger has sho been conjured."

The quarters of the voodoo, or "conjure doctor," are usually located in the heart of the toughest negro section of a city, off the street and in some dark, dismal-looking alley. Here, under seclusion and out of reach of the law, he carries on his nefarious profession.

Some of his biggest fees come from the "fixing" of clandestine relations between the sexes; and some of his best customers are white men of high social standing and wealth, whom the world does not suspect. Many of his patrons, too, are ignorant negroes of the slums, who pay good fees to have a "conjure" removed, or to have an enemy placed under the magic spell.

To gain access to the voodoo doctor's quarters is no easy matter. Before a stranger is allowed to cross the threshold, the man of supposed magic power must be convinced that the visitor will in no wise cause trouble with the law.

Admitted to this mystic place for the first time, you feel as though you had been suddenly transmitted to some weird, gruesome scene from Dante's Inferno. Seated in a large high chair on an elevated platform, like a king on his throne, you behold a big, black negro. His lips are of enormous proportion. His nose is prominent, with widely extended nostrils. His large eyes protrude from their sockets, and in the dimly-lighted room those eyes shine like coals of fire. He resembles some giant member of the ape family rather than a human being.

His garb is as strange looking as his countenance. On his head he wears a covering resembling a turban, while his body is shrouded with a peculiar-looking robe of varied colors. His speech, whether natural or affected, is most peculiar and difficult to understand.

On a table before the voodoo king, lies coiled a big hissing serpent. As you gaze at the snake a strange sensation seems to creep over you, and you wonder if the voodoo king has cast on you a spell. The serpent's tongue moves to and fro from its mouth, while its eyes shine with a mystic glow. You now realize that you are standing in the presence of a real voodoo king, who claims that he gets much of his magic power from the snake which lies before him.

Over the king's table there is suspended a large round piece of dried flesh. The king tells you this is a dried human heart, cut from the body of an enemy of voodooism while the person was yet alive. On the walls are suspended one or more human skeletons, while about the room are numerous large dried snakes, lizards, frogs and other reptiles.

There are jugs and bottles containing many strange and curious concoctions, "guaranteed" by the king to produce any desired effect. About the room are several divans and numerous curious-looking pillows made by hand. The floor is covered with numerous pieces of cloth of various shades of color, stitched together. A peculiar odor, perhaps from the dried reptiles and other objects in the room, permeates the air. On a table stands an old-fashioned oil lamp; cast-

ing a dim light and giving to the room a ghostly and weird appearance.

The voodoo king will tell you that he inherited his strange powers from a long line of African ancestors, and that through the serpent these powers are kept alive within his being. At his death his mystic powers will pass on to the body of some other negro man, or perhaps some negro woman.

The weird objects about the room are all used by the voodoo king in his calling. Each object is supposed to possess some specific charm. What is known as the "gris-gris," or "conjure bag," is made and sold by the voodoo king to many who are simple enough to believe in voodooism. The "gris-gris" is made of a number of broken twigs, bits of bone, pieces of horse hair, ground brick, a piece of the "human heart" and other things. When placed under the doorstep, or about the house, this bag is supposed to cause great evil to the occupants of the house. Whenever a negro finds a "gris-gris" about his house he loses no time in getting to the nearest voodoo doctor, to have the evil spell removed. The "gris-gris" is sold by the doctor for \$2 each, or for as much as he thinks his customer will pay.

SOME TIME ago I secured entry, after considerable difficulty, to the quarters of a noted voodoo doctor in Mobile, now dead. He had made a fortune from his nefarious practice. His place was located just off St. Louis Street, at that time in the very heart of the underworld of that quaint old southern city. He was especially noted as a dealer in the "gris-gris" and was king of the voodoos in Mobile. It is said of him that the evil he did still lives after him. However, there are still many negroes who hold to the opinion that the greater part of his work was for the good of both whites and negroes.

Before the civil war voodoo meetings were held secretly by the negroes all over the South. But today the negroes are more enlightened, and for this reason but few of these meetings are now conducted. The present-day voodooism of the South is confined more to the practices of the voodoo doctor, or king, and is more in the form of fortune telling.

These voodoo meetings were always held in great secrecy, and late at night, during the dark moon. The place of meeting was usually on the borders of some dismal swamp, surrounded by a deep forest of gigantic trees. Here the conclave of negroes would gather, and, after divesting themselves of their clothing, they would gird their loins with red handkerchiefs, or something of the sort. A king and queen lead the conclave. They were distinguished from the others by something tied around their waist, usually a blue cord. The king and queen stood in one end of the room, and in front of them was a box containing a serpent. Before the ceremony, runners were sent out in every direction to make sure no person was in hearing distance. Assured of this, the ceremony of the adoration of the snake would commence. The king told the negroes gathered around him that they might have all confidence in the queen and himself, and asked them to tell what they most desired, and it should be given to them. In turn, each would stand in front of the king and queen and implore the voodoo god. Some would ask for freedom and wealth, some for the gift of domination over their master, some to be crowned with heaven's glory, some for more and better food and raiment.

Following this ceremony the king would lift the queen upon the magic box, containing the serpent. As soon as her feet touched the mystic box she became "possessed." Like another python, she quivered, while her entire body convulsed. She was supposed to be "inspired," and from her thick black lips the oracle would give out its edicts. On some she bestowed freedom from slavery, on others love and success and many other things to their liking; but, to a few, bitter invectives came from her lips in thundering tones. After all questions had been answered by the oracle, the members of the conclave formed in a circle, and within this circle the serpent was placed. Each member of the gathering would present an offering; each in turn would be assured by the king and queen that their offering was most acceptable to their divine protector—the serpent. Then an oath was administered, binding all to secrecy, and obligating all to assist in carrying out any work designated at any time.

Following the administering of the oath, the famous voodoo dance took place. The dance was usually held after an initiation into the ranks of voodooism. The king would draw a circle in the center of the room with a piece of charcoal. Within the circle the black neophyte stood, trembling with fear. Into

the neophyte's hand the king placed a package containing powdered brick, pieces of bone, horsehair and other equally senseless things. Taking a piece of wood, the king would strike the neophyte gently on the top of the head, then commence singing an African song. The entire membership would join in the singing of the song, while the black neophyte danced until convulsed. He was then given liquor to revive him and taken to the altar, where the oath was administered to him, while he fell into an hysterical fit.

At the conclusion of this ceremony the king would place his hands upon the box containing the serpent, make peculiar movements of his body and communicate these movements to the queen, who conveyed the motion to every member present. Soon all commenced to shake their bodies, from their waist line to the top of their heads. The queen was more affected than any. Frequently she would visit the serpent to absorb a fresh supply of magic power. A large jug of liquor was then passed around, and all drank freely, until every member of the conclave was under the influence of drink. The negroes shouted, and their shouts grew louder and louder until pandemonium reigned. Many of the members fainted and almost choked, while they danced and shouted, spinning around on their feet, tearing the few remaining vestments from their bodies, some lacerating their flesh. Often many would dance and shout until they were deprived of reason, and fell in a faint.

Many voodoo kings and queens of the South became quite noted, and had many followers. Ignorant whites, and some not so ignorant, as well as most negroes, were believers in this strange doctrine and its powers for good and evil.

One of the most noted voodoo queens was Marie Laveau of New Orleans. Innumerable stories are told concerning her, and during her career her name was on the lips of practically every citizen of her native city. She sprang suddenly into prominence and fame. Where she came from, or who she was, no one seemed to know. Not long ago I visited the cathedral archives in quaint old New Orleans, where I had the privilege of delving into some musty old records, which threw the first light upon the heretofore clouded origin of that noted voodoo queen. In those records was registered the marriage of Marie Laveau to Jacques Paris, under the signature of the famed Pere Antoine. These records show the marriage ceremony took place, August 4, 1819, and refer to the bride and groom as, "both free people of color."

During the year 1826 Jacques Paris died. After his death his widow formed a liason with Christopher Glapin. To them several children were born. One daughter was named Marie, and, being of illegitimate birth, took the mother's maiden name—Marie Laveau. According to the records found in the cathedral archives, the date of the birth of Marie Laveau was February 2, 1827. From her birth until young womanhood, nothing was known of her. At the age of about 22 years she suddenly sprang into prominence as a dabbler in black magic. At that time she was living in a dilapidated cabin on Bayou St. John. Both whites and negroes visited her cabin in great numbers during those days, seeking advice concerning many matters of importance to them. She is still well remembered by many of the older people of New Orleans, and according to many white people her character was none too good, but members of her own race still have a strange veneration of her, perhaps thinking it safer not to cast aspersions upon the dead.

It is said of Marie Laveau that she was a woman of fine physique, of light complexion and straight black hair. Often she would introduce herself into some of the best white families of New Orleans as a hair dresser, and, while engaged in this work, would assist in clandestine correspondence between sweethearts and assist youths in their affairs of love. As queen of the voodoos, she is said to have carried out the ritual according to the original creed. To idolatry she is said to have added blasphemy. To her belongs the distinction of having first popularized voodooism in New Orleans by inviting members of the press, the sporting fraternity and others to the annual festivals held by the voodoos on St. John's eve (June 24), at some place not a great distance from Bayou St. John. She sold charms, and claimed to cure all manner of ailments, caused by the magic spell of the "gris-gris."

Notwithstanding the many stories of evil related concerning Marie Laveau, it is said of her that she was tender hearted, and that she performed many deeds of charity and kindness. It is stated that those in trouble or dire distress found in her a really true friend, and that she visited many prisoners in the jails in New Orleans, who had been condemned to death, taking them fruit and sweetmeats. One of these prisoners was Antonie Cambre, convicted of murder. She had access to this prisoner's cell, and on the eve of his execution she visited him. In the Creole dialect she is quoted as saying; "Mon petit, befo' you

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VOODOOISM

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die tell me what you like to eat and I'll make you a good 'lil' dinner." But the downhearted Cambre only shook his head.

"I'll make you a gumbo file, like you ain't taste in yo life," she pleaded with him, trying to tempt him.

Finally Cambre assented. He ate the "gumbo file," and a few hours afterward lay dead in his cell, thus cheating the hangman's noose.

OTHER stories told of Marie tend to show that she was cunning, as well as charitable and wicked. One day a young man called at her door, asking alms. He was both ragged and hungry. For some time financial matters had not been going well with Marie, and she had no money. But an idea quickly came to her mind. She had the young man lie down upon a couch, and she placed a sheet over him. At his head and feet she placed lighted candles. Then, taking a tin cup in her hand, Marie sat on the doorstep, asking the passersby for money with which to defray the funeral expenses. Marie well knew the love of the average negro for the "wake." She soon had the cup full of money and running over. Entering the house, she quickly resurrected the "corpse," and with him divided the collection.

Did Marie Laveau possess supernatural powers? This question is still discussed in New Orleans by both whites and negroes. But the more enlightened people regard Marie as having been only a successful impostor.