



FANATIC DEVOTEES OF VOODOO IN DEEP SOUTH PRESERVE WEIRD RITES

Superstitious Blacks Cling to Belief in
Sorceries and Charms Devised by
Vanished 'Kings' and 'Queens'

By John A. Menaugh

THE scene is a sodden clearing beside a stagnant bayou. It is night—a night moonless and black as the inner depths of hell, the darkness so thick that it seems to push back the twinkling of the stars. Just the sort of a night when witches would be abroad on their diabolical errands. In a nearby canebrake a panther kitten squalls fretfully, and unseen bats fly hither and thither, dodging the giant cypresses that crowd in upon the clearing.

Lights are approaching along a path through the trees, lights that string out in a serpentine procession as they are borne by shadowy figures. The lights, each a tiny candle flame, reach the open space beside the bayou and spread out without pattern or design like a field of dancing fire-flies. Torches flare up in a dozen places in the clearing, torches of pitch wood that send their curling smoke skyward and bathe the surrounding cypresses in a sickly yellow light. The shadowy figures that bore the candles through the woods are transformed at once into men and women by the lighting of the flares. They are black men and women, the kind one might expect to meet in the fastness of an African jungle. On their feet are sandals, and about the loins of each is knotted a scarlet handkerchief. All but two of them, a man and a woman, wear nothing more than the sandals and kerchiefs. The black bodies reflect the light of the torches or silhouette in front of the smoking flames to cast fantastic shadows upon the lurid trunks of the trees. The man and the woman who wear more than the single loin cloths obviously are persons of importance in this strange group. The man, who, in addition to his loin cloth, wears a blue belt about his waist, and a crimson cloth about his head, is the king, or high priest. The woman, in a flowing red garment and with her head bound with a bright bandanna, is the queen, or high priestess.

An altar is produced from among the crowd, and the king and queen take their places before it. Upon the top of the altar is placed a cage containing a rattlesnake, and the weird ceremony of the woods is begun with the adoration of this poisonous serpent, which coils and strikes in vain against the sides of its cage as it rattles its deadly warning in unceasing fury. The snake is a deity, and the king beseeches this revolting god to bless his people. Then the king lifts the queen bodily and places her figure over the box containing the maddened serpent. The queen is seized with convulsions, and while she writhes the almost-naked blacks, in a semi-circle before the altar, stare at her with a blank and transported look in their faces. The convulsions cease and the queen's lips begin to frame sentences. It is the oracle which is talking with her voice. Flatteries are bestowed and terrible laws are laid down in the name of the serpent through the voice of the queen. Questions are asked and answered, and a magic oath of secrecy taken by all, which is sealed by the warm blood of a newly slain goat. The crowd suddenly comes to life with shouts of "Zombi! Zombi!" and the dance begins. The initiation of new candidates forms the first part of the dance. The king traces a large circle on the ground and installs within the circle a neophyte. He then produces a package of herbs, horse hair, rancid tallow, waxen effigies,

broken bits of horn, and other objects. He strikes the neophyte with a carved paddle and launches into a weird and savage chant. The candidate begins to squirm and then to dance, and before long is flinging himself about the clearing in a frenzy of movement. Other candidates follow through the initiation rites and join the dance. Soon everyone is dancing in wild abandonment. The dancers shriek and moan as each tries to outdo the others. Nude girls, white as chalk, appear among the leaping figures. They are young wenches painted white, or else, as it has been whispered in many places, actually white girls. The dance grows more revolting as it continues. The dancers turn into beasts, tearing their own

flesh with gnashing teeth, all the while screaming like tortured souls. Then the obscenities begin.

What is this strange mumbo-jumbo that has turned men and women into furies? Where is this wildest of wild ceremonials?

It is Voodoo. And the scene—almost anywhere in the south a couple of generations ago, in Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, or wherever dwelt the sons and daughters of slaves. Voodoo, or hoodoo, as most of the ignorant Negroes called it, was a mixture of witchcraft and primitive religion that held a sizable proportion of our black people in its grip for many years and up almost to recent times. Voodoo has disappeared now from many places where it once was a flourishing evil. Here and there in isolated regions of the south it is said today that Voodoo rites still are practiced under cover; but though the bulk of the Negro population has been educated away from this form of savagery, many of the superstitious beliefs of Voodoo still are clung to by the black people.

Voodoo meant everything to the Negro of the south. It was first of all his religion, and it included conjuring, sorcery, the making of charms and effigies, the casting of spells, the healing of the sick, and the raising of the dead. Throughout the south the druggists of the cities and the towns always kept on hand adequate supplies of snakeroot, sassafras, lodestone, brimstone, asafoetida, resin, and bluestone, to sell to the conjuring doctors and the Voodoo priestesses for the making of charms. It would require a large book to begin to tell of all of the strange practices of the priests and priestesses of Voodoo. No man or woman ever has lived who has had a complete understanding of this strange institution's many ramifications. The lucky rabbit foot and the breast bone of a chicken are a part of Voodoo, just as was the worship of the serpent and the drinking of goat's blood.

New Orleans in earlier days was the capital of American Voodoo. The last queen or high priestess of Voodoo died in New Orleans in the eighties. She was a hair dresser who made a profitable business of the weaving of charms and the making of effigies, and her name was Marie Laveau. A witness to one of the Voodoo orgies in which Marie Laveau took part in 1878 thus described the scene:

"An iron pot was swinging on a tripod with gumbo cooking in it. Claret mixed with cinnamon and aromatic herbs was warmed and served with the gumbo. All participants were naked, and Marie Laveau beat time while the men and pretty yellow girls danced around."

Voodoo came to America from Africa, directly or indirectly, by the way of Haiti. In the last named island it flourishes today as the most important of all things in the lives of a considerable proportion of the people of that black republic. In the last part of the eighteenth century thousands of Negroes were taken from West Africa and sold into slavery in Haiti. Some also during that period were transported to Louisiana. They came from Guinea, the Gold Coast, Dahomey, the Congo, and other regions along the African Atlantic coast. They brought to Haiti and America the worship of the serpent, and a hundred and one other beliefs in mysterious and frightful gods. The serpent of the African native was the python, and the supreme spirit which spoke through the python god was Li Grand Zombi. In America the rattlesnake became the serpent God. In 1809, because of the war between France and Spain, a great many Haitian planters who had settled in Cuba with their slaves to avoid the Haitian revolution came to America through the port of New Orleans. What the simple Negroes in America lacked in Voodoo rituals they then obtained through this new influx of slaves.

In Haiti Voodoo today is said still to embrace the most disgusting of pagan rites, the extreme of which is human sacrifice. In remote regions, where the authorities have little or no control, Voodoo priests and priestesses still on rare occasions put to death the volunteer victim of sacrifice. The case of Cadeus Bellegarde, the cannibalistic murderer, who slew a number of his relatives, is still talked about in Haiti. It was only thirteen years ago.

Though Voodoo originated in Africa, the origin of the word has been a question which has perplexed many. Some writers would derive the term from the followers of Peter Valdo, the Waldenses, or Vaudois (witch) of France, a sect that spread to Haiti, yet the prevailing opinion is that the term is of African origin.



Marie Laveau, New Orleans' last queen of Voodoo.