

One Night in New Orleans...



by Scott A. Johnson

The crowded streets pulsed as Billy fought his way through the throng of partiers celebrating Mardi Gras. Amid the women who flashed their breasts for beads and men who stood wolfishly by, hoping to catch a glimpse, or better, a cheep feel, it seemed nothing could be wrong. Not to a college boy like Billy. The scene of drunken debauchery and hedonistic pleasure was what he'd heard stories about all his life, and now that he was here, in the middle of Bourbon Street, he could think of nothing but to run, to hide from the zydeco and blues filled air and beer that ran through the streets.

Only half an hour ago, he was one of them, a drunken, nineteen-year-old a perpetual erection with more money than brains. Twenty minutes ago, he walked through an old French-Quarter cemetery hoping that the creepy vibe would further loosen the morals and pants of the girl he'd met. Only ten minutes ago, he stopped to take a leak, neither paying attention, nor caring, who saw or where he was. And only five minutes ago, he watched the girl, whom he'd hoped to bed, or at least molest in the cemetery, break out in painful sores all over her body before the creature that seemed to form from congealing shadows tore at her neck with its teeth and drained her dry.

It wasn't a vampire that emerged from the shadow of Marie Laveau's crypt, at least, not one like he'd ever heard of. It was hideous, well over six feet tall and hunched over, drooling as the sores that covered its body ran with puss and slime. It seemed to just appear behind her, while she giggled at the sight of him standing there with his member in his hands, relieving himself against a graffiti-marked wall. He didn't even have time to zip himself up when the creature pounced on her and left her twitching against the concrete crypt.

He ran, unsure of the direction he was going. It seemed the farther he ran, the faster his feet kicked, the more crypts sprang up around him, obscuring the night sky. He glanced behind him, stumbling over smaller stones for doing so, only to see the disgusting form leaping from marker to marker, leaving a trail of infectious slime on whatever it touched. How he managed to get back to Bourbon Street, he could not say. Only that he ran until he came to the bent and ruined iron gate and pushed through a breath before the creature slammed into it, slashing at him with its wicked claws.

He did not turn again, certain that to do so would mean to see the thing bearing down on him. As he ran down Conti, he could hear the thing coming after him leaping from the bottoms of the overhanging balconies, gaining every step of the way. When he reached Bourbon Street, he pushed his way through the blissfully unaware faces and drunken smiles, screaming until he tasted blood. Of course they paid him no mind. They pointed, laughed at the kid who'd drunk too much. But he was stone sober, terrified of the touch of the creature that followed him.

The party swept him along for several blocks until, in a thin spot in the crowd, he turned down a side-street called Dumaine. The street, though still packed, was empty in comparison to Bourbon. He hoped he could make better time on a less-trafficked street, if the thing was still after him. He slowed, his chest heaving with the strain of running, sure that he'd vomit up all his precious beer any moment. The street behind him was empty. The creature had not followed, he thought. He'd not seen it since leaving the old cemetery, only heard it pursuing him. Maybe he'd lost it after all.

He fell back, wheezing on the pavement until he realized that he was still running about with his tackle hanging out. He quickly zipped up and sat on the sidewalk.

"Find somewhere else to cool you're heels, boy," he heard a voice say from behind him. It was the owner of the shop whose stoop he was using for a stool, a tall thin woman with long strait hair and a necklace with skulls for beads.

"Please!" he panted. "I'm being chased...Horrible...Ate a girl...It's coming!"

"Wait a minute," she said, cocking an eyebrow. "Ain't you that boy what pissed on the grave of Madame Laveau? Cou me chere, you fucked it big didn't you?"

The fact that she knew what he did would not register in his mind, as it was competing with the images of the creature that still loomed heavy and the name that stuck in his mind like a metal sliver.

"W...Who?"

"Don't tell me you never heard of the great Marie Laveau. It don't seem right! The greatest Vodou priestess in history, and you never heard of her none? Where you from, under a rock?"

"Utah," he replied, sill in shock.

"Oh. That explain alot," she smiled. "So what she call up on you, eh? Zombie? Vampire? What?"

"I don't know what it was," he said, his voice quaking. "It was covered in sores! It ate...It ate..."

"You din even know her name?"

His eyes fell to the ground as he shook his head.

"Dumb dumb dumb," she said. "You come on inside, chere. Sadie gonna help you."

"Why?"

"Heh! N'Orleans got enough problems without some dumb-dick kid goin' spreading the stories. And the last thing we need is someone with a Sousson-Pannan chasing him all over hell and back. It's bad gris-gris."

Billy followed Sadie into the shop, constantly glancing over his shoulder to see if the...whatever it was... was following him.

"No worries in here, boy," she said without turning. "You in Dark Sadie's Juke Joint now. Ain't no bad gris-gris getting past my charms. I done saw to that."

The shop looked like a flea-market record shop, with posters and fliers as old as fifty years adorning the walls and vinyl records lining the bins. Had he not been terrified beyond rational thought, he might have been impressed. Past the dozens of bins that obscured the back of the shop there was a red curtain, which Ellie parted and gestured for him to follow. It was here that her real business was done, he decided.

The small room was a testament to the Voodoo religion. Adorning the walls were severed chickens feet and strange markings, canisters of every size containing herbs he'd never seen before, and was not sure were entirely legal. In the center of the back wall was a large altar, lit with dozens of burning votives and in the center sat the Papa-Loa, the father spirit of Voodoo.

"Don't touch nothing," she said as they passed through the curtain. "What you done, boy you fucked yourself bad, you know that?"

"You said that already. What is that thing?"

"Heh, sounds like a Sousson-Pannan to me." She rummaged around beneath the counter until she came up with a large book. "Dis will tell us what we need to know."

She flipped through the pages, scanning for the right entry. Finally, her face lit up as she found that which she sought.

"Aha!" she shouted. "Yep, I was right! It is a Sousson-Pannan. Oh, bad loa this thing. Says here they drink blood and are evil to the core. Once they get your scent, they don't never stop coming for you."

As if on cue, the front door of the shop rattled as powerful fists began banging on the outside. Through the glass, Billy could see the sticky smears where the fists hit, and he knew that the Sousson-Pannan had found him.

"Oh God! Oh Jesus!" he cried, desperately looking for a way to escape.

"Shut your mouth!" barked Sadie, clearly unruffled by the creature's presence. "I told you, ain't no bad gris-gris getting past my charms. Now shut up and listen. You safe in here."

"Can I just stay until it goes away?"

"Shit no!" she shouted. "Thing like that is bad for business. I won't sell no records that way! Besides, what you gonna do when it comes time to go back to your home and find that thing under your bed. What then, eh? No, you better just face it now."

"What can I do?"

"Better," she said. "Now, it say here, that thing loves two things, and only two things. Blood..."

"Oh God..." moaned Billy.

"And Rum. You give that thing a good bottle of rum, he leave you alone...for a little while."

"I don't want a little while. I need to get rid of it for good! How can I kill it?"

"Stupid boy!" she growled. "You can't kill nothing what's already dead! Don't you know that? You want it gone, you gotta make peace."

"With that?"

"With the Madame Marie Laveau."

Billy gaped at her. Peace? With a Voodoo priestess that had been dead for God-knows how long? She had to be joking.

"I don't believe in voodoo," he said. "I don't believe in ghosts, or demons, or Sousson-Pannan, or any of this shit! I'm a Christian, and this stuff just isn't real!"

"Oh?" she smiled. "Maybe you'd like to go outside and tell that thing that you don't believe he's real. Go ahead. I'll wait. And when he's done draining you dry, you be just another body to wash up in the gutter what partied too hard. See if I care."

Billy looked out the window at the creature, who even now left slimy prints on the glass as it was trying to get in. For just a moment, it caught his gaze and it stopped pounding. The thing cut through him with its yellow eyes and smiled coldly at him, telling him how much it would enjoy every life-draining moment that it spent sucking the blood from his body.

"What do I have to do," said Billy, near tears.

"Good thought kid," said Ellie. "First, you need rum. Lots of it. You want that thing to drink until you done making peace with Marie."

"Okay, rum. Then what."

"Then what? First, I'd start by washing your piss-stains off her crypt. I think I'd be mad too, if I found you pissing on my bed."

"Okay, then what?"

"Then you gotta make peace with Marie with an offering. Give her something she wants, something that she crave."

"Like what? She's dead."

"Dead don't mean nothing in New Orleans, boy" spat Sadie. "You don't never disrespect someone just a'cause they dead."

"Sorry. So what should I give her?"

"Marie, she's what we likes to call a Loa, a spirit. She's like what you folks call a saint, in a way. Our Loa, they miss their earthly pleasures. Drink and food, that sort of thing. What Marie loved in life, as well as death, are cigars. She loves to smoke."

"Rum and cigars. Okay, fine. Then what?"

"Heh...Then you pray she accepts before that bad boy outside tears your head off."

Sadie showed Billy a back way out and told him the quickest way to a liquor store that might turn the other way at his lack of good judgment, then slammed the door behind him. He didn't look back as he ran as fast as he could.

The fellow at the liquor store, a fat surly man, would sell him nothing until he mentioned Sadie by name. Then he smiled.

"Sadie helping out another stupid kid, huh? Okay. What you need boy."

"Rum and cigars."

"For what?"

"I'm being chased by a Sousson-Pannan."

The shop-keepers face went ashen.

"Shit, boy? Why didn't you tell me that when you came in? I don't want that damned thing coming in here! Look, you want good stuff, not no cheep rotgut that it might not like. If it's bad rum, he'll kill you slow. How much money you got?"

"About two hundred in cash," said Billy.

"Give it. I'll give you two bottles of the best I got in the house and a box of the best cigars you'll find in Louisiana, then you get the hell out of my store."

Under any other circumstance, Billy might have argued. Two hundred dollars, apart from being all he had left to get home on, was a great sum of money to him. However, seeing the logic in the shop keeper's argument, and seeing as he wanted to actually see his home again, whether he had to hitch-hike or walk, he wasn't about to haggle. He handed over the money, and with a sponge and a bottle of water that the shop-keeper threw in out of pity, ran from the shop as quickly as he could.

When he arrived at the cemetery, it was well past two o'clock in the morning. Back home, he mused, the bars would be long closed, but here, the sounds of Mardi-Gras still echoed through the air. He jogged as quickly as he could manage while carrying his parcels until the great stone structure rose up in his vision.

He slowed his pace to a brisk walk, his stomach churning with apprehension as the tomb loomed closer. When he was less than ten feet from the place where he'd angered the Loa, he heard a sound that was unmistakable to his ears. He whirled in horror as the Sousson-Pannan lumbered into view, dripping filth and disease from every open wound on its body.

Billy froze, wanting to run but unable to make his legs move. As the creature drew nearer, he remembered the words of Black Sadie, and quickly snapped open one of the bottles of rum, splashing just a thimble-full into the air. The creature came to a dead halt, mere inches away from his face, his rotten breath feted in Billy's nostrils. Its glassy yellow eyes went wide, then narrowed dreamily as it inhaled the scent of the sweet rum that wafted from the bottle. Billy cautiously raised the bottle to eye level, letting the creature see it in his hand.

"Ooooh..." said the creature with a voice that sounded like hamburger being dragged through gravel. "That's goooooood...."

It took the bottle and shambled off to lean against a tall stone tomb and it sat with a heavy thud and took a long pull off the bottle. Billy stood watching for a moment until his brain finally began working again and kept him to task. It took him only fifteen minutes and the full bottle of water before he felt sure he'd washed away all of his own filth. What he'd mistaken for graffiti, he discovered, were tiny red crosses, prayers from those who'd come to visit the grave. He glanced over to see that the Sousson-Pannan was nearly done with the bottle, and when it was done, Billy was certain, it would come for him.

He rushed to the door of the great mausoleum, setting the box of cigars and the remaining bottle of rum at the threshold. Then, as Sadie showed him, he took one cigar and lit it, blowing the rich smoke toward the vault. He opened the bottle and took a mouthful, then spat the rum on the door in a fine mist. Then, laying the lit cigar across the top of the bottle, he dropped to his knees.

"Madame Marie Laveau," he said with great reverence. "For any offense I have caused, I am truly sorry. Please accept these gifts of drink and smoke, and forgive my ignorance."

He looked toward the creature, expecting it to leap up and tear him to pieces. Instead, it finished the bottle and raised it in a toast to Billy.

"Thanks," it said. "S'good drink."

The creature melted back into the shadows, leaving only the bottle on the ground and the sweet scent of rum in the air. Billy turned back to the crypt to find the bottle now half-empty, and the lit cigar gone.