

THE KING OF CUPS

by James Quina

Chapter One: The Scourge of New Orleans

YELLOW JACK. THE FEVER. BRONZE JOHN! When the first ones died, few people in New Orleans had dared to utter the words for fear of what might come. The city officials, the newspapers—The Picayune, The Times Democrat, and the L’Abeille, the merchants—all explained away those early deaths. It was not yellow fever. It was something else. Best not to think too much about what might come. Best not to panic the people, to cause a quarantine, to stop all commerce. But Marty McKinstry knew what was coming.

He remembered what his grandfather had told him about the yellow fever epidemic of 1853, when thousands of bodies were stacked like firewood on the streets and makeshift cemeteries sprang up all over the city. At first, they buried the bodies in wooden coffins, but as the gravediggers died off or abandoned their grim work, the bodies swelled in the hot sun, breaking open their coffins. Wild dogs descended upon the exposed bodies, ripping away fingers, ears and other body parts, carrying them into the streets. City officials then relied on Irish indentured servants and chain gangs to bury the dead and the bodies were thrown into mass graves.

It was fomites in the air, people had said, spreading the pestilence. To protect themselves against these fetid exhalations, they smeared their bodies with garlic, camphor and vinegar. They fired cannons in the streets, filling the air with black smoke and sulfur to drive out the pestilence. They burned skins, horns and the hooves of animals; they placed barrels of tar in the streets and set them ablaze and in their homes they burned sulfur in small metal pots. The sky was dark over New Orleans and the air carried the stench of burnt sulfur.

All through the French Quarter, horse-drawn hearses waited in front of Creole cottages. The driver shouted, "Bring out your dead!" Some brought out their dead in wooden coffins; others in wheelbarrows. Often, there was no one left to bring out the dead. Whole families were wiped out.

People prayed. They swallowed large doses of Dailey's Magical Pain Extractor and Townsends's Sasparilla, guaranteed to cure sores, fevers, the spitting of blood, fits, and to relieve any bodily pain. They doused themselves with cold water, took cathartics and emetics to flush out the disease; and once the signs of the disease were upon them, they turned to more severe remedies: starvation, bloodletting, leeches and mustard plasters to draw out the poison in huge blisters. They blistered large areas of the skin until a third degree burn was produced and assured themselves that the subsequent infections and pus formation was a sign that the offending toxins of yellow fever were leaving the body.

Doctors prescribed mercury in the form of calomel. They administered it until the patient showed signs of mercury poisoning—severe diarrhea, ulcerated gums, loss of teeth, foaming at the mouth. The more drastic the treatment, the greater its curative powers, they thought.

Everyone feared the first signs of Yellow Jack. The tongue turned scarlet, fever rose and then dropped so low that one felt frozen, and

then rose again. Vomiting began—at first a clear liquid, then a black bile of partially digested blood. The veins of the face and body swelled and looked as if they would burst. One’s skin and eyes turned saffron. Except for those who were blessed or lucky, death was imminent. If you survived, you were a true New Orleanian.

It happened haphazardly, during the hot summer months, but some summers they were spared. That’s the way Marty’s grandfather had told it. Yellow Jack came and went and you never knew when it would come back, and you had to be strong to endure.

People died by the thousands; yet, lured by money, thousands more came—from Spain, France, Germany, England, Italy, Ireland, Port au Prince and Nova Scotia. Massive immigration had begun in the 1850s and had continued steadily in spite of the risk of yellow fever, scarlet fever, cholera, smallpox, and malaria.

Planters knew that if they could keep a crop of cotton in the ground for three years, they would become millionaires. Investors and bankers followed the wealth along with the various tradesmen necessary for shipping cotton: stevedores, bale pressers, classifiers, weighers, sorters, brokers, and warehousers. They took their risks while disease swept at random through their city. And now, in the summer of 1905, Yellow Fever, the most dreaded of all diseases, had come back. The death toll had mounted from mid-May and increased as the temperatures reached record highs. Some doctors predicted that if the disease continued its upward spiral, New Orleans would see one hundred cases per day before summer’s end.

For weeks, Marty had witnessed the ravages of yellow fever in his own family: Arthur McKinstry, his Papa, lying on a bed before him; wrenching in pain, vomiting out black bile, the stench of sulfur heavy in the room; Sister Bennett, in her dark habit with a starched white collar, measuring the drops of laudanum she put into Arthur’s mouth, and he, Marty McKinstry, helpless to give life to his dying papa.

A balding Father Thomas Rooney, dressed in black, except for his Roman collar and purple stole around his neck, sat on a stool beside Arthur. He opened a prayer book and placed it next to the dying man on the bed.

Arthur lay on an iron bed trimmed with brass. At the head of the bed, heavy oval filling rods encircled trumpet-shaped brass spindles. For his comfort, a mosquito net, draped in the form of a tent, covered most of the bed, but was open to one side to administer to the dying man. In the humid summer months, mosquitoes swarmed over anything alive.

A washstand near the side of the bed held bottles of medicine, a decanter of water, cotton and gauze. On the opposite side of the bed sat an oak dresser with a full-length French beveled mirror.

Marty stood in the shadows near a mantle beyond the foot of the bed. Trim and muscular, he appeared to be in motion, even when standing still. He had just turned sixteen. His blond hair covered most of his forehead; his blue eyes radiated energy, and as he moved out of the shadows and toward his Papa's bed, he gave the impression of an abandoned animal seeking sanctuary. He tightened his jaw. What would become of them? How would they manage?

Father Rooney administered the last rites, leading Arthur through an act of contrition. The prayer was part of the sacrament of penance necessary for forgiveness.

“Arthur, repeat after me,” said Father Rooney: “Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for all my sins...”

Marty had known the words to the prayer since he was six or seven and he now repeated them silently along with Father Rooney and his Papa.

“I am firmly resolved, with the help of Thy grace, never to sin again and to avoid all occasions of sin.”

The priest removed consecrated oil from his bag and anointed Arthur’s eyes, lips, fingertips, nostrils and ears. After another prayer, he made the sign of the cross, and it was complete. Taking off his stole, he placed it in his bag with the consecrated oil. He took Arthur’s hand and squeezed it.

“Do you have any requests, Arthur?” asked Father Rooney.

Marty could barely see the frail figure of his father through the netting. Slats of light came through the tall shutters across from him and behind Father Rooney. A small pot of sulfur burned near the window to drive away the bad air that carried the disease.>

Arthur roused himself and spoke almost in a whisper. He called out for Steve and Maggie. Father Rooney moved away and beckoned the children to come to the side of the bed.

Maggie was nine years old with red hair, large brown eyes and freckles on her face and arms. Steve was thirteen. He was thin with sharp facial features and light brown hair. They stood behind Father Rooney near the window. Both were crying.

“Come,” said Arthur. “Come and kneel beside my bed.”

Steve came forward and knelt and Maggie followed, kneeling beside him.

“Hush now,” said Arthur. “I want you both to promise me that you’ll listen to Marty and always mind him. He’s in charge now. Do you understand?”

“Yes, papa,” they said, “Promise.”

“I promise,” said Maggie.

“I’ll mind him, always,” said Steve.

“Good,” said Arthur. “Now bow your heads.”

They both bowed their heads and Arthur extended his hand first to Steve’s head and then to Maggie’s.

“I give you both my blessings,” he said.

Maggie cried aloud, opened the mosquito net wider, and crawled onto the top of the bed.

“Papa!” she shrieked.

Sister Bennett caught her waist and pulled her back. But Maggie clutched the sheets of the bed, crawling toward her papa. Shocked, Marty stepped forward and grabbed her hands, gently nudging them away from the sheets.

He did not fear that she would contract the disease from their Papa; medical experts agreed that the disease was carried by bad air. In a given family, some would contract it, but not others, even though they lived together in close quarters. He felt, however, that Maggie was unwittingly desecrating the death of her Papa.

“You can’t do that,” said Sister Bennett. She put her arm around Maggie’s shoulders, drawing her closer to her, hugging her.

“Let me see you, Marty,” cried Arthur.

Marty stood to the side of the bed.

“Let me look at you,” Arthur repeated.

He began to cough—a wheezing, labored cough. Marty saw that Arthur’s face and arms had turned yellow-orange. Even the whites of his eyes had turned yellow.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” asked Marty.

“I wish you’d known your mother, Marty. She was a saint.”

Images of Marty’s mother swirled in his consciousness. He remembered her as a young woman with curly blond hair, sitting on the porch with him on her lap. She pointed to Chestnut

Carriage horses and a black stallion passing in the street and to the Japanese Magnolia growing in their front yard, and she told him their names. She sang Irish lullabies to him. He remembered her voice, but most of all, her infectious laughter and how he had missed that laughter when it stopped.

Marty saw Sister Bennett put a vial of laudanum on the washstand. She nodded to him. Tall and middle-aged, her face was long and weathered, but Marty saw the tenderness beneath her haggard appearance. He returned her nod.

“I’m counting on the good Sisters and Brothers to take care of you,” Arthur continued. He put his hand to his mouth. His body contracted in another paroxysm of vomiting. Sister Bennett wiped away the dark, bloody vomit and propped his head up with a pillow. Slowly, he began again, “But there’s one thing they can’t do, Marty.”

“Yes, Papa?”

“They can’t take the place of Steve and Maggie—your brother and sister—your flesh and blood, Marty. Until they can care for themselves, promise you’ll stay with them and protect them.”

Uncontrollable coughing again seized Arthur.

The reality of his dying broke through Marty's consciousness, and he reached out to touch his Papa's hand. In the past, his father had spoken like this only on rare occasions, when an aunt or a cousin had died. But this time, he was the one dying.

An abyss opened before Marty. His Papa, as he knew him, would not exist! The diseased body before him was all that was left of Arthur McKinstry—all that was left of his muscular frame, his quick wit, his skill at boxing, his business sense as a merchant, his recollection of his wife, his love of family, his fondness for good Rye, his Irish Catholicism, his penchant for practical jokes, and his habit of whistling while reading the morning newspaper. All of this now seemed like a dream. His Papa's body would become a corpse, and the corpse would become dust.

Arthur coughed and spoke in a whisper.

“Promise me, and swear before God, Marty, that you'll watch over your brother and sister—that you'll protect them, no matter what. Come, Marty. Kneel here beside me and promise. Kneel, son. Make your promise.”

Marty was silent. He'd never made such a serious promise, but he loved his brother, Steve, and his sister, Maggie, and he loved his Papa. This was his Papa's dying wish. So Marty mustered up all the conviction he had in him to make a such a serious promise, one that would bind him for life.

He could hear the clock ticking on the mantle. The room, Sister Bennett in her dark habit, his Papa on the bed before him, all seemed frozen in time. Kneeling next to the bed, tears welled in his eyes as he squeezed his Papa's hand.

He recalled his Papa taking him, Steve and Maggie to the Gulf Coast one summer. In Pascagoula, they swam, cooked outside, and took turns rowing the boat that came with the cabin they had rented. In the evening they sat on the screened porch, gazing at the waves coming in and each of them told a ghost story. His Papa always told the scariest ones.

During his first communion, his Papa was there, looking on as he returned from the altar to his pew. And there was the afternoon he rushed in the house and unpacked giant size boxing gloves. They were like big pillows on your hands and he taught both Steve and him the basics of boxing—and he taught Maggie, too, when she was willing. He remembered the debates at the dinner table, the songs they would sing around the piano—with Arthur pounding out a rhythm and leading them in singing risqué limericks. Later, Steve would entertain them with his selection of ragtime that he played on his harmonica, and Maggie would demonstrate her new cartwheels and back flips.

Since the age of twelve, he had helped his Papa with inventory at Paddy's, their tavern on Prytania. It had always made him feel important to help with the family business. Funny things came back to him, like the time Steve discovered that their Papa had put a baby alligator in their bathtub. And once he had come home depressed after losing a baseball game, and his Papa told him that he loved him, win or lose. Memories came back to him of his Papa teaching him to cook, how to pick up crabs and to shuck oysters. And then there was the surprise bullwhip his Papa brought home. He had taught him how to crack it and how to pop the pecans off the lower limbs of their tree in the backyard.

The rasping voice of his father broke into his thoughts. His Papa sounded like a drowning man, struggling to clear his lungs, to take one good breath.

“Promise, me,” he said.

Marty raised his head. He looked directly into each person’s eyes as he spoke.

“I promise to watch over Steve and Maggie, to keep my family together and protect them from harm, no matter what. I’ll do this. I swear before you, Papa, Sister Bennett, and you, Father, and before both of you,” he said, looking at Steve and Maggie. “And before God.”

He blessed himself and felt his Papa’s trembling hand on his head. His Papa whispered: “I love you, son.”

Marty felt his father’s hand drop away and he looked up. He saw that massive hemorrhaging had begun. A black excrescence poured from Authur McKinstry’s nose, mouth, ears and eyes. He had breathed his last.

Marty held his yellowed hand. Authur McKinstry was dead. The black hearse would come and take away the body. But his Papa, his beloved Papa, was gone forever.

He felt the gentle touch of Sister Bennett’s hand on his shoulder.

“He’s with God now,” she said.

The words did not comfort Marty. The idea seemed strange to him—like wishful thinking. All he could see was the corpse before him, and the nothingness that would remain when they took away the body. At that moment, Marty saw death as an all-consuming power, making a mockery of fine sentiments. And in his despair, he buried his face against his father’s dead body and wept.