

*New Orleans, May 1919*

John Riley stumbled into the offices of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* an hour and a half after he was supposed to have started work. He sat at his desk, took a long slow breath, and raised his eyes to peer about the room. Even in his befuddled state he could see his colleagues stealing glances at him and he wondered exactly how unkempt he must look. He had been out the night before, at his usual spot on Elysian Fields Avenue, and he raised a hand to his face to make sure he wasn't still perspiring. When his fingers rubbed against a stubble at least two days old, he felt a pang of regret for not having sought out a mirror before his arrival.

He looked at his desk and his gaze landed on his typewriter. Its black metal frame, its crescent of type-bars, its levers and keys, all made the thing seem daunting somehow, cold and hard and other-worldly, and he realized he wasn't in a fit enough state to start writing just yet. He'd need a few coffees and a packet of cigarettes, and maybe a lunchtime brandy before he was ready to tackle anything requiring a fully functioning brain, so he decided to kill what was left of the morning with something that approximated work. He rose and stumbled over to the in-tray where the letters to the editor were kept. He grabbed as many as he could, cradling them against his chest, and returned to his seat.

There was the usual correspondence from irate residents, people with complaints, know-it-alls, and those who used the letters page as a forum for arguing with one another. He selected a few of the longer diatribes to print as they filled up the page more

easily, then he sifted through the letters from people who claimed to have seen the Axeman. Since the killings had started a few months ago, the office had been inundated with letters from concerned residents who swore they had seen him on his way to some murder or other. Riley sighed and wondered why these people sent these things to the newspaper and not the Police Department. He lit a cigarette and picked up the last letter in the pile. It was an unusual-looking envelope, rice-paper thin, with no sender details, and the newspaper's address written on it in a spidery scrawl of badly splattered, rust-colored liquid he hoped was ink. He took a drag on his cigarette and opened it up with a fingernail.

*Hell, May 6th, 1919*

*Esteemed Mortal:*

*They have never caught me and they never will. They have never seen me, for I am invisible, even as the ether that surrounds your earth. I am not a human being, but a spirit and a demon from the hottest hell. I am what you Orleanians and your foolish police call the Axeman.*

*When I see fit, I shall come and claim other victims. I alone know whom they shall be. I shall leave no clue except my bloody axe, besmeared with blood and brains of he whom I have sent below to keep me company.*

*If you wish you may tell the police to be careful not to rile me. Of course, I am a reasonable spirit. I take no offense at the way they have conducted their investigations in the past. In fact, they have been so utterly stupid as to not only amuse me, but His Satanic Majesty, Francis Josef, etc. But tell them to beware. Let them not try to discover what I am, for it were better that they were never born than to incur the wrath of the Axeman. I don't think there is any need of such a warning, for I feel sure the police will always dodge me, as they have in the past. They are wise and know how to keep away from all harm.*

## THE AXEMAN'S JAZZ

*Undoubtedly, you Orleanians think of me as a most horrible murderer, which I am, but I could be much worse if I wanted to. If I wished, I could pay a visit to your city every night. At will I could slay thousands of your best citizens, for I am in close relationship with the Angel of Death.*

*Now, to be exact, at 12:15 (earthly time) on next Tuesday night, I am going to pass over New Orleans. In my infinite mercy, I am going to make a little proposition to you people. Here it is:*

*I am very fond of jazz music, and I swear by all the devils in the nether regions that every person shall be spared in whose home a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned. If everyone has a jazz band going, well, then, so much the better for you people. One thing is certain and that is that some of your people who do not jazz it on Tuesday night (if there be any) will get the axe.*

*Well, as I am cold and crave the warmth of my native Tartarus, and it is about time I leave your earthly home, I will cease my discourse. Hoping that thou wilt publish this, that it may go well with thee, I have been, am and will be the worst spirit that ever existed either in fact or realm of fancy.*

*The Axeman*

Riley took a drag on his cigarette, put the letter down and wondered if its author really was the Axeman, and if not, who the hell else would send something like that to the paper. Authentic or not, it'd be a sin not to print it. Riley grinned and rose, and his colleagues turned to look at him as he marched towards the editor's office. He didn't care to wonder if he should tell the authorities before going to press – in instances like this, it was better to ask for forgiveness than for permission. They'd print it, and the city would read it, and a chaos would descend, and New Orleans might well spiral into the greatest night it had ever seen.