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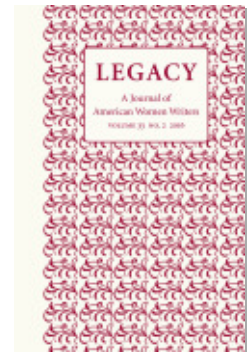
## St. John's Eve

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## St. John's Eve<sup>1</sup>

ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON<sup>2</sup>

Edward King was a young man with a large and enthusiastic faith in himself and his own powers of self possession and ability to get on under any circumstances.<sup>3</sup> And he said to his credit that he was still very young, and had not yet penetrated far into the world which he regarded with a rather cynical contempt and pity for its general ignorance. He was but just out of school, and while waiting for the honors, which in the logical course of events, must, in the near future, surely be heaped upon him, he condescended to inquire of his uncle for a position which would spread the butter on his daily bread. His lofty superiority was too much for his uncle's peace of mind, and while he could not refuse the boy a place he looked forward to a daily contact with his nephew as being too great a strain upon his nerves. King, Singleton and King was a great commission house with branches in various Southern cities. Mr. King found a convenient vacancy in the New Orleans house, and put his nephew there at once. To New Orleans then, came Edward full of the dire necessity of regenerating the musty old town, and allowing it to reap to the full the benefit of his stay, necessarily<sup>4</sup> a short one, since higher things must surely call him away soon.

It was hot weather, the latter part of May when he arrived and it was a long time before he had gotten around the city quite a little, and had drunken of its traditions, superstitions, and legends to the full. They filled him with more than an unusual amount of contempt, and he was wont to descant to his near acquaintances upon the folly of such traditions and beliefs in this enlightened age.

"I tell you, fellows," he said oracularly one day at noon, "it's all folly, don't you know, for you people to be living here in this, ~~you may say~~, twentieth century, with such tommy-rot as I hear all about you, and you still having faith in it. Why I believe your town and its people have been asleep since the first building."

"Oh, I don't know," put in, one Gasté, "I'm not so sure of that. If we had been asleep there wouldn't ~~there~~ be any big commission houses here for young Yankees to make a living out of."

If Edward perceived the thrust, he took no notice of it, but puffed his cigarette calmly.

"It seems absurd," he continued, "all this clinging to old forms and old things, just because your fathers liked 'em. Why the people actually venerate

that old black, praline woman down the street, just because she look<sup>s</sup> like some other old black praline woman of fifty years ago. <sup>N</sup>ow, a bright, fresh boy in a white jacket to sell her bad candles, would not only be neater and cleaner, but more <sup>[active]</sup><sup>5</sup> and <sup>less</sup> garrulous as well."

Gasté exchanged pitying glances with his companions, and there being no reply, the conversation languished. But Edward continued his investigations, and between them, and ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> scheme for the 'Society for the Cure of Unnecessary Superstitions', he was kept pretty busy outside of working hours.

"See here," he said one evening to the other clerks, "what<sup>s</sup> all this nonsense about voodooism and other such truck I hear?"

Gasté, as usual, spoke for his companions, "Well, it's rather a big order, I'm afraid," he smile[d] queerly as he spoke, "to attempt to describe it in full."

"Oh, say now, you'd have me believe all such trash, wouldn't you? Just give me a general idea, you know."

["I'M afraid I can't," said Gasté coldly.

For several days, Edward pursued his investigations in the lower part of the city, and having arrived at the conclusion that he had unravelled all the mystery of it, he smiled knowingly to himself, and was content. His cock-sureness had not won him many friends, and even his blunted perceptions noticed that his companion clerks in the office avoided rather than sought him. This however, he attributed to jealousy of his superior powers and mental equipments. So he shrugged his shoulders and went his way and said as many insulting things as ever.

It was late one night in June when he was walking up Decatur street from the office and humming to himself as he strolled along. The clerks <sup>all</sup> had ~~all~~ to work late, and Edward, the loudest to complain at what he termed an imposition, had been the first to leave when time was announced. Decatur street is grim and forbidding<sup>6</sup> even at its best, and to-night, Edward thought the warehouses and alleys had never seemed so full of lurking shadows. He was growing distinctly nervous, and when a hand was laid on his shoulder, he started violently, and restrained himself with difficulty from crying out aloud. Gasté, for it was he, laughed.

"I didn't know you were nervous."

"[W]ell—well—<sup>I</sup>m<sup>not</sup>, as a rule," he was cross at himself for being caught off his guard, "But this street isn't a promising one."

"It isn't," assented Gasté, "and it isn't a safe one; that's why I hurried to catch you. We're the only two who come up town, and company is preferable about here."

"Oh, I<sup>m</sup> <sup>not</sup> afraid," boasted Edward. <sup>G</sup>asté smiled and was silent for awhile. Finally he broke in with,

"Still studying our superstitions?"

"Well, a little, yes. I've about dismissed them all as bosh, however."

"Many others have before you."

"All but one thing," continued Edward, "This St. John's Eve business. What is that?"

"Well, I can't say that I know much more than that one that night, the voodooists are supposed to meet and hold high carnival with rites sacred to them."

"Thi^n^k I'll run out wherever it is, and look at it," said Edward.

"Then you'll do more than hundreds before you have done," replied his companion shortly.

"Why, is there a mystery about the meeting?"

"There is."

"Bosh, I'm going, wherever it is. I guess a little of this will do all I want." He clapped his pocket and jingled some silver. Gasté made no reply, and the conversation turned to other matters until they reached their respective car-lines and parted.

But despite the clink of silver and the flash of banknotes, Edward was unable to find out much more about St. John's Eve than what Gasté had told him. At first, he was baffled and chagrined, but finally, his native cheerfulness asserted itself, and he decided that the whole business was a gigantic fake invented by garrulous old women to frighten children to bed. There he rested content, and proclaimed his beliefs loudly to his fellow clerks.

An unusually large consignment of rice was about to be handled at this time, and coming as it did, in the wrong season, the work at the office was very heavy. So busy were the clerks kept night and day, that time passe^d^, and no one, least of all, Edward, who was still new to his duties, kept notice of the days.

The 24th of June came, and everyone worked late into the night. It was hot and breezeless, and the men bent over their desks in their shirt-sleeves, and looked longingly at the moonlit streets, the while they pushed their heads closer to the electr[i]c fans for a breath of air. Edward bent an aching head over his h ledger, and cursed the fate that kept him bound to a row of elusive figures, when he knew that near by lay the river, and a breeze and a boat. The stillness of the room was broken only by the scratching of many pens, and an occasional nervous cough from some hurried clerk.

"May I see Mr. King," said a deep voice suddenly.

Everyone looked up with a start. A tall, dark man dress[e]d in black with a somber face and gloomy manner, was standing in the center of the room. How he had come in was a mystery, for no one had heard a foot-fall on the uncarpeted stairs or in the hall. Yet, there he stood, his whos^l^e mien that of extreme sadness and misery. Edward rose from his stool and advanced toward the stranger.

"Are you Mr. King?" he asked.

"I am," was the reply.

"I am on a very important mission," said the somber man, "and your presence is an absolute necessity. I must beg you to come with me."

"But I don't know you," said Edward, "Nor do I know anything about your mission."

"It's a matter almost of life and death," said ^persisted^ the man[.] "For pity's sake, come on. You're not afraid, surely?"

There was an underlying tone of contempt in the last words that nettled Edward, and without reply, ^h^e started for his hat and coat. ^G^asté was out of his seat in a moment, and would have restrained him.

"Don't be foolish, King," he exclaimed, "What do you know of this man? Send him about his business."

"This is my affair," said Edward haughtily putting him aside, "I am no coward."

Gasté shrugged his shoulders and returned to his stool. The other men, hearing his repulse, bent over their work again, and ^E^dward and the stranger passed out unnoticed.

When they had gained the street, Edward inquired what the pressing business was that had called him out in such a peculiar manner. The somber man shook his head.

"I must not speak," he sighed, rather than spoke. "Trust me, and all will be well." As he said this, he opened the door of a carriage that stood at the curb, and motioned e^E^dward to a seat within. The door was closed on the two, and they had rattled down the street, before Edward had time to realize that the horses and driver were still, vague shadows, and that they were curtained within in intense darkness. He wondered why the curtains were not raised, for at every moment the heat grew more unbearable. He spoke to his companion about it, but receiving no reply, he sank back in a corner and gave himself up to wonder.

For a long while, it seemed hours, they drove. The heavy paving blocks of Decatur street gave way to a wooden paving; then Edward heard the soft sound of a finer stone; the clack clack of asphalt, and finally, the hard clatter of a shell-road. For what seemed an interminable time, the^y^ drove on this road, and still no sound from the man in black, still no air in the closed vehicle. It seemed to Edward that he must stifle. He spoke again, asking for air, this time, sharply and imperatively, but before there was time for a reply, the carriage stopped, and the silent man had opened the door, and was helping him out.

It was a wierd [sic] scene on which he gazed. All about him was a thicket, and just to the right was evidently a swamp, for the needle points of young pal-

mettos stood up straight and spear like. The carriage had stopped under a great live oak, and its funeral draperies of gray moss hung in fantastic festoons about the driver's heads and over the horses' backs, giving them a strange, unreal appearance. To the left, there was the sheen of water under moonlight, but whether of lake, river or bayou, Edward could not tell.

He turned indignantly to his guide. "What does this mean?" he asked, and he could not help confessing to himself that his heart was heavy. "Why do you bring me here?"

There was a moment's silence; a silence that hung heavy and weighted on one, and in which the rustle of a falling leaf was as the crash of a tree. The somber man smiled for the first time, a slow, terrible smile, and for answer waved his hand back of him.

Edward turned, and started back in horror. It was as if a scene had just been conjured up for him. A great fire blazed in a clearing, its red tongues forking and lighting up the great, gray-wreathed oaks about. Around it, in various attitudes of repose, sat and reclined a number of half-naked women and men. Their forms looked unreal in the wierd glare of the fire. The women's hair stiffened upon their breasts. There was no movement, no life in the group, save when an eye-lash quivered, or when a hand was put up to push back a stray lock.

Suddenly in the deep stillness of the forest, the far, harsh notes of a bell were heard. It was as if its jangling tones had galvanized the group into life. With a start, every man and woman, rose, and Edward could see that their skins were of all shades, from deepest black to purest white. They paused with arms uplifted and eyes turned to the fire.

Then there stepped out from the throng, an old man. He was great and strong-looking and black, while a white patriarchal beard swept his muscular chest. With one finger pointed menacingly at the fire, he began in a low voice to intone a peculiar rhythmical chant. Motionless stood the figures, until he had droned his monotone out, then when he struck into a higher key, the chorus of voices chimed in and chanted with him, the while their arms waved slowly up and down, and their feet patted slow time to the melody.

Fear gripped hard at Edward's breast, and cold drops stood out on his forehead, for he felt that he was looking upon the rites of St. John's Eve, and sceptic, though he was, she had heard enough of the fate of the onlooker at these ceremonies to tremble and be afraid. He looked about for his companion, but he had gone. Gone too, were the horses, the carriage and the driver. He was alone in a death-trap. He looked about for a place of escape, but none there was save that which led across the vision of those at the fire. He crept as quietly as he could under the boughs of the great oak where the carriage had stood, and

watched with bated breath for a chance to escape. Gradually, however, curiosity got the better of fear, and he listened intently to the chant.

It was in an unintelligible language to him, a rude, harsh patios [sic], from which the syllables tripped one over the other, and hurried out roughly. They were singing louder now, and the waving of the arms was faster, and the movement of the feet quicker and lighter. Louder swelled the chant, faster waved the arms, quicker moved the feet. They had broken into a dance now, and wild cries mingled with the song. The dance had become a frenzy, and the chant a shrill, continuous cry. The flames leaped and flickered on tossing wild hair, and foam-flecked mouths. Some fell down and were dragged away from the circle, but the dance went one.

Suddenly, the old man stooped, and knocked his knuckled ~~but~~ hands upon the ground; every other being followed his example, and then, bent and doubled, they danced on, waving their arms and singing. Dancing, dancing, contorted and ~~twisted~~ ~~edgy~~ twisted, while the cries grew gurr<sup>^</sup>tt<sup>^</sup>ural and hoarse. They were growing smaller, smaller, whi<sup>^</sup>le<sup>^</sup> their faces took on wizened, terrible shapes; their eyes shot forth lurid animal glares, their lips mouthed, and sent forth unhuman sounds. They were changing forms; already one man had—

Edward could stand it no longer. He put his hand before his eyes, and screamed aloud at the horror of the thing he saw.

There was a sharp silence after his cry. He stood still, crouching with covered eyes, but he heard the pause, then the loud alarum cry of the old man's voice, and the scurrying of feet in many directions. He put down his hands and peered out again. They were searching, pulling at trees and palmettoes. They were coming toward him. He felt his head reel, and then he was surrounded, ~~a~~ and was striking out savagely in every direction, fighting, scratching[,]~~biting~~, kicking, struggling for life.

He set his back against the tree, and prepared to sell himself as dearly as he could. They were fiends who danced before him, although they had recovered their human shapes, and they were bent on his life. He had no weapon save a small ~~dagger~~ <sup>^</sup>knife<sup>^</sup>, and as soon as he could draw this, he struck out with it savagely. But ~~th~~ they were fifty to one, and they were closing in around him, snarling in his face like wolves; the women even more fierce as <sup>^</sup>than<sup>^</sup> the men. The old man was not among them; Edward could see him piling the fire high with fresh wood, and he shuddered as he realized the fate before him. He could not hold out another minute; his strength was ebbing fast with the blood from innumerable wounds. Then he heard a deep familiar voice.

"Be still!" it said.

The pack melted away from him and slunk off toward the fire again in sullen attitudes. Edward looked up to see his former companion, and knew no more.

The sun was shining full in his eyes, when he woke, bruised, stiff and aching. He could not realize at first, ~~wah~~ what had happened, and then, with the miserable consciousness of it, he shuddered, and tried to sit up.

"There, there, you're all right," said a cheery voice.

He looked about him in surprise. He was on the floor of the office, and Gasté was bending over him.

"What time is it?" he asked weakly.

"Eight o'clock," was the reply.

~~Wah~~ "What am I doing here?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I came down early to finish up some work and found you here lying under your desk."

"Guess I've been dreaming," said Edward, trying to stand up.

"Well, I wouldn't dream often if I were you. You look as if you have been fighting, and fighting hard."

Edward gazed blankly at his battered figure, and sat down in a chair, weak and helpless.

"Look here, Gasté," he said finally, "did I leave here last night with a queer looking fellow?"

"You did, like a—beg pardon—like a ~~balm~~ blamed fool."

"Well, I suppose you won't believe me," said Edward, after staring hard at Gasté to see if he were speaking the truth, "But I—well—I—" his head fell forward weakly.

Gasté found a convenient flask and put it to the boy's lips.

"What happened?" he asked.

When Edward had finished his story, Gasté whistled and drummed his fingers on the desk.

"The patron of St. John's Eve doesn't believe in his rites being doubted," he said slowly, "and I suppose he concluded to convince you. Now you'd better take a cab and go home."

"I am ~~no~~ convinced," and Edward wearily left the office, after leaving a note to say that he was too ill to work that day.

"Well, I wonder," said Gasté, whistling after he had gone.

And so did Edward, but wondering did not bring a solution to the problem.

Alice Dunbar

#### EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. This is the first published appearance of "St. John's Eve," a circa 1900 typescript story in MSS 113, Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers, Special Collections, University of Del-



aware Library, Newark. A brief introduction to the story can be found in “Recovered from the Archive: Two Stories by Alice Dunbar-Nelson,” by Caroline Gebhard with Katherine Adams and Sandra A. Zagarell, elsewhere in this issue.

2. This story was originally composed under the name Alice Dunbar.

3. Note on the text: Whenever possible, the editors have preserved the characteristics of Dunbar-Nelson’s original typescript manuscripts, including strikethroughs and insertions. When necessary, we have signaled errors with [sic]; when errors might cause undue confusion or distraction, we have indicated our corrections in endnotes. We have silently corrected extra or missing spaces between words or characters when they appear to be the result of typewriter error, and particularly when Dunbar-Nelson has edited them with pencil annotations.

4. In the original this word has an uncorrected typographical error and appears as “necessarity.”

5. We have used brackets here to indicate that we are not certain this is the inserted word.

6. The original text contains a typographical error: forbiddg^[*illegible*]^. Although the hand-inserted correction is illegible, “forbidding” is clearly the intended word.

7. The original text contains what appears to be this correction: patriachar^|^chal.