

# Edouard

Alice Dunbar

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PERE BOUTIN came down the sandy, pine-bordered walk with a knotted brow and a gait that grew slower and slower. He was perplexed and his forehead knitted more and more in a comical assumption of dignity. Pere Boutin thought that he was dignified, but when one weighs two hundred pounds, and is short and rolls in one's gait, is it reasonable to expect that the world will be impressed by one's magnificence?

Edouard was tall and lean and brown with a strength of muscle and length of limb a little unusual in a boy still in his teens. He had followed the plow and rowed his pirogue down the smooth river waters, and swung the axe into the fragrant, resinous trees in the woods, until his physique was as that of a man's. A sculptor would have posed him for a god, but no one knew about sculpture or art in St. Tammany Parish, and the river's reflection meant nothing to Edouard's eyes, accustomed to all the lavish beauty of a semi-tropical climate.

He lived on the border of the Tchefuncta River in a wee house, far away from the sleepy Covington City, which, after all, is only a town, vague and lonely and forgotten. The small house leaned to one side, and rested in a caressing way against a great mud chimney, as if seeking support in its old age. There was a flower garden in front of it, with prim hollyhocks and larkspurs and crimson poppies waving against a whitewashed picket fence. A crape myrtle stood in one corner of the garden and a magnolia in the other. Edouard had been wont to regard the latter with a sort of mystic awe. It had been planted by his grandmother in her girlhood days, and when she had died, almost her last charge had been about her favorite tree. He remembered how a great creamy blossom had lain on her still breast on that awful, funereal day, and how a solemn pilgrimage was made to the churchyard every spring to lay the first fragrant bloom across her grave.

"Ah, mon fils," began Pere Boutin, rubbing the wet red kerchief across his face again, "but I have bad news fo' you."

Edouard straightened his back and rested on his hoe. He was weeding out his garden, not the one of poppies and hollyhocks and larkspurs, but the larger one which kept the table supplied.

"What?" he asked a little abruptly.

"I have jus' been down to see you' Uncle Aristide, an' he t'inks to take you wid him nex' week to the city, an' let you learn one trade."

Edouard stood staring at his father with uncomprehending eyes. What could he mean? To go away from the little brown house had been a dream of his for so long a time that it had become a part of his nature. But he had never spoken it aloud. He had hidden it deep down in his heart, half ashamed, half afraid of his treason against home.

Pere Boutin mopped his face again, and raised his voice irritably.

"Fo' w'y you stan' an' look at me lak dat? Cannot you understan'? You mus' go to New Orleans to wo'k. We are po', an' you mus' learn one trade."

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"Oui, mon pere," replied Edouard. He was slowly turning over the earth with his hoe and trying to beat down the cries of joy that clamored for voice. "I weel go w'enever Uncle Aristide wishes."

It was an exciting time in the Boutin household, these days before Edouard's leaving. People did not go away much in that district. Mere Boutin had not gone to the city since that prehistoric time when she and the Pere, but newly wed, had gone to see the Mardi Gras for a honeymoon tour. The memory of that giddy time had served for a family legend ever since; and little sister Jeanne had held her head above the crowd that clamored for voice. "I weel go w'enever Uncle Aristide wishes."

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"You mus' be ver' careful, mon fils," said Mere Boutin tearfully, for the hundredth time, as she wiped her eyes on the clothes she was mending and making for him.

"I weel, ma mere," Edouard would reply tenderly. He was still half dazed at his good fortune, and knew but little of what went on about him. The Mere Boutin would rock to and fro, her ample form shaking ponderously in her grief.

The day came at last, and Mere and Pere and sister Jeanne were down at the bayou's edge to see Uncle Aristide's boat sail off with their idol. Edouard was brave, and waved cheerily as they cast anchor and sailed slowly down the lazy stream. He choked down a hard, salt something in his throat as he saw Mere Boutin fall in her husband's arms, and Jeanne stoop suspiciously low to pat Uno's head. The group vanished in a queer mist as he stood gazing and swallowing that insistent something. Then a low hanging oak-branch, laden with soft, gray moss that brushed his face, brought him back to earth, and life had begun for Edouard.

That was a wonderful journey. The quaint gray schooner, laden to the water's edge with fragrant pine wood cut in the short lengths that housewives love for kindling, sailed slowly down the shady bayou. Save when Uncle Aristide, who was a gruff man with a child's heart, called him to do some task, Edouard lay on the deck gazing into the water and wondering of the world he was soon to see. It was full of dangers and temptations and disappointments, Mere Boutin had said, and Mere Boutin knew, for had she not spent two whole weeks in the city once? But Edouard was sure all would be well with him, for he was going to work hard and go to mass every Sunday.

Then the boat had reached the great blue waters of Lake Pontchartrain, and they were skimming out on foam-crested waves, away from the sunset which glowed red and glorious about them. The next morning, they had crawled into the Old Basin, and were at rest up near the Rue Rampart. Edouard had watched with ever-widening eyes, the transition from the Bayou St. John and its quaint villas, to the artificial, brick-lined canal with its business blocks and old-fashioned warehouses and grim draw-bridges, which opened grudgingly to let them pass with a score of other lake craft, while the foot-passengers fumed at the delay, and the car-drivers bantered each other from opposite sides. His head whirled at the crowding of craft and the great houses, and the stir of the water side. He would have paused and have taken it all in slowly, but that Uncle Aristide had him by the arm, and was gruffly bidding him follow.

He was to learn a trade. That was essentially the proper thing to do, and no self-respecting young Creole would deem his life a success without such an equipment. And Edouard was to learn to be a cigar maker, which is a good thing to know, after all, since the world thinks it must have its cigars. The head-man, to whom, all trembling and fear-shaken, came Edouard with Uncle Aristide, was a small man, whose wrinkles set upon his parchment face like a suit of ill-fitting clothes.

"You' Uncle Aristide is a good man," he said by way of greeting.

Edouard drew closer to his complimented relative and murmured an inarticulate reply.

"You weel mek a fine cigar-maker," continued the little man, musingly peering at Edouard's hands.

Edouard was embarrassed at this turn of compliments and looked to his uncle for help. But Uncle Aristide was contemplating a pile of tobacco at the farther end of the room. A sudden homesick awe had taken possession of the boy.

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"Ah," cried the cigar maker with sudden and startling enthusiasm. "Come, we weel talk together. I have wo'k fo' you."

It may have been that Edouard was homesick and heartsick too, in those first weeks; but there was much to do and more to see. All day it was the shop, and in the evenings back to Uncle Aristide's little home on Treme Street, where was Tante Pauline, and petite Cousin Zora, who was such a tease. Then on Sundays, to the Cathedral to mass, and long exploring tours through the wonderful city. So Edouard's letters home were marvels to Jeanne; and Mere Boutin rocked herself to and fro in her chair, and wondered to Pere how the city had outgrown her memory.

But of Emile Edouard said nothing. Emile was a fellow-worker in the shop. Emile was light and graceful and dapper, and his ease and polish of manner made Edouard blush more than once because he despaired to himself of ever being more than a foolish country "Cajan." Edouard adored Emile as a superior being, and his days and nights were given up many times in striving to emulate this little Chesterfield. Emile would take him about and show him many things, and Edouard humbly thanked him, and was grateful in his way for the contact.

It was one day after the noon hour that he came into the shop breathlessly, for he was late; and hanging up his coat, would have hastened to his bench. But Frank Shelton, a great burly man, with a cruel underjaw, held him firmly back by the arm.

"Here he is, fellows," he growled.

Edouard wrenched his arm free, and stood still with blazing eyes.

"Fo' w'y — you stop now," he panted. "You git you' han's off me."

"He's game, yes," remarked Rene, fondling a forbidden cigarette.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Laporte, the wrinkled owner, hastening to the group.

"Oh, nothin' much," drawled Shelton, "only this young fellow's got away with my watch." He spoke slowly and distinctly, and every word cut into Edouard's mind, searing as it went. He gasped as the full import of it came to him.

"Oh, but — but — oh, Mistare Laporte, you know I could not." He was pleading to Mr. Laporte, but the little man looked hard at his shame-reddened face, and twiddled his fingers with nervous haste. Edouard looked wildly around the circle of grim men for one kindly glance, but he met only lowering brows and unpitiful looks bent upon him.

"He took it," continued Shelton, "there's no doubt of that. He was seen rummaging in my coat, and then he went out, and he's been down to Lowenstein's. You know who that is?"

There was a hard laugh from the men. There were some who had been to the pawnbroker's on Orleans Street, and all knew Lowenstein's sign.

"Ah," said the little Laporte, and he wrinkled his face more at Edouard.

"But — but, I thought you' coat was mine. It was on my peg," cried Edouard desperately, "an' — an' — I was only looking in the windows at a guitar."

The men laughed again, and Edouard turned helplessly to Emile. But he stood among the rest, and there was a cold, supercilious smile on his face.

"Where's the police?" queried one.

"Oh, never min'," said Shelton. Something in the boy's pitiful face had touched something within him, and he felt a momentary qualm of suspicion that he was not guilty. "I won't arrest him," he growled, ashamed of his own weakness, "but I'd like to kick him."

"Where's the money he got?" cried Rene. So they searched Edouard but there was no money to be found.

"He mus' go, he mus' go," muttered Mr. Laporte, and he went his way nodding his head. It was very annoying to stop work in this way, and the Uncle Aristide was such a good man, too.

Edouard's eyes were full of tears, and he went blindly to the row of pegs where the men hung their coats. He took his own down and held it in his hand, and then put it down for a minute while he searched for his lunch pail. Then, still blinded and unseeing what he took, he picked up a coat, and putting it on, turned from the shop with down-dropped head and a blazing anger and shame fast growing in his face. In vain he sought to meet Emile's eye for a farewell glance, but Emile's head was studiously averted, and Edouard went out the door followed by a grim silence that was more cruel than hoots or jeers could have been.

Once out in the air, he gave himself up to bitterness. He had been wrongfully accused, but evidence was against him, and the shame was as great as though he were guilty. He felt that he could not meet Tante Pauline's

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gaze nor Zora's laughter with this burden still upon him. The thought of Mere Boutin and the brown house on the river cut still deeper, and involuntarily he quickened his steps as he struck out in a direction which led far away from Treme Street. They had called him a thief when he was striving his best to be honest. He would go out and live to himself for there was no place for thieves at his Uncle Aristide's.

He plunged his hands deeply in his pockets and trudged rapidly along, he knew not whither. The people in the streets looked curiously into his set face and blazing eyes, and made way for him. He walked blindly, caring for nothing save to get away from the scene of his humiliation, until he came to Tulane Avenue across Canal Street. It was all unfamiliar ground to him, and he paused for an instant to read the inscription on the gate of the Charity Hospital. Then he saw the sewer-digging machine, and stood still to laugh.

It was a queer thing to him, that sewer-digger. This was in the days when such work was only an experiment, and it was all very clumsy and awkward. Such an ungraceful iron work over the great open trench, and overhead, huge iron baskets that slid along over their track to the puffing and wheezing of the machine, until they came to a certain point, when they would tilt and empty their hundreds of pounds of earth and mud and slime. Then they would glide back to the starting point, there to be filled again.

Edouard drew nearer to the machine work to watch the elaborate system of pulleys and wheels, and so near did he stand that he could not notice how dangerously close he was to the open trench and the heavy swinging baskets overhead. Two little street gamins were playing near him. They laughed and pelted each other with the mud and sand which they found. The smaller one shouted a triumphant challenge to his playmate, stumbled, screamed, and was in the trench.

Edouard dropped on his knees and peered in after him. It was not deep, and the little chap stood only waist high in muddy water, a good arm's length away from Edouard. He was about to step in and hand the boy out to the street, when the warning chug-chug and creak of machinery caused him to look up quickly. The great iron basket with its mass of mud and slime was gliding overhead and was pointed directly for the spot where the child stood sobbing. In a minute, it would pour out its bulk, and woe to the one who stood beneath its force. The engine was too far away to shout a warning to the men in charge, and the basket too near for the stopping of the engine to have done any good. Its momentum would have carried it on. Little as he knew of mechanics, Edouard realized all this in a quick, intuitive flash. He threw himself flat on the ground, and seizing the sides of the trench with one hand, reached the other down to grasp the boy's arm. His reach was too short, and the boy trembling with fear, could not understand how to reach up his hands. Edouard pulled himself farther over the trench, until his head and shoulders and half his trunk hung over it. He could feel the soft mud of the trench sides giving way under his hand. The basket had glided directly over his head. He could hear the ominous click which told that it was tilting. With an almost superhuman effort, he stretched out his farthest, and grasping the child by the collar, he threw him over his shoulder, and wriggled himself back from the sides of the trench. At the same instant, the mass of dirt came rattling down into the water.

Some passers-by had stopped to see the outcome of what promised a tragedy, and the sewer workers, and some men from neighboring shops, came running up to praise him and to offer him aid. Edouard was dazed and frightened and his only clear thought was that in swinging the boy over his shoulder, he had heard the sleeve of his coat rip out.

And now he was a hero. For the first time he was tasting the sweets of adulation. He was ashamed and would have run away and hid his face but that the little woman who kept the millinery shop had noticed the ripped sleeve, and Edouard must step into her parlor, hitherto undefiled by the clumsy feet of man, and have his coat mended. Edouard blushed as he took it off, and was about to hand it to her, when an unfamiliar look about it caused him to take it back suddenly, and carry it to the window for closer inspection. It was Emile's. He had made a mistake when he was leaving the shop.

All the shame of the noon-hour came over him again, and he moodily handed the garment back to the milliner, and gave himself up to bitterness. He had saved a little boy's life, but — they called him a thief at the shop, and nothing could wipe that away.

The milliner's voice broke in on his musings.

"There's a paper tucked in the lining somehow," she was saying, "shall I pull it out for you?"

"It is not mine," he replied.

But she had already pulled it out and handed it to him. He glanced at it abstractedly. Then he sat up suddenly

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and gasped. Could it be true? Could this awful thing that confronted him be a fact and not a dream? It was but a little yellow slip of paper. There was Lowenstein's name on it and Emile's, and a number and something about a gold watch and twenty dollars. He took the mended coat abruptly from the milliner, and murmuring scarcely audible thanks as he put it on, plunged through the crowd waiting outside the door, and hastened down town again.

"Here he is again," called out Rene, as Edouard entered the shop a half hour later.

"I — I — put on the wrong coat," he explained to Mr. Laporte.

"Yes, yes," muttered the little man, "git you' own coat an' go. You' Uncle Aristide is a good man — a good man," and he picked up a bunch of tobacco strippings and looked at it sorrowfully.

Edouard crossed over to Emile's bench. "Here is you' coat," he said shortly, "an' — an' — this." Their eyes met, and Emile's face grew livid.

"You won't tell?" he asked thickly.

"No," Edouard spoke with difficulty.

"I — I'll make it all right, you know."

Edouard turned on him in a fury, "What do you tek me fo'?" he demanded, and strode from the shop, taking his own coat from the peg as he went out.

This time he went to Treme Street. It was easy now that he knew where the burden of guilt lay. He told it all to Uncle Aristide and Tante Pauline, all, that is, save the finding of the ticket. Deep down in his heart he locked Emile's secret, and as the days and weeks went by, the sorrow of it grew a little less. Uncle Aristide found other work for him to do, and he went his way and was happy.

One Sunday Mr. Laporte came to the house. In his perplexity, he had wrinkled up his face until it seemed that his skin must drop off.

"I have come to mek reparation," he said to Edouard. "Dat man, Emile, we foun' him out, yaas. Lowenstein, he tol' me, an' I tell the mens, an' dey give you cheer." He held out his hand to Edouard. "You mus' come back," he said pumping his arm vigorously. "An' you knew all dat time?" he queried, peering into Edouard's face.

But Edouard was silent. He had promised not to tell.