



THE HEART OF HAPPY HOLLOW

by

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Chapter 2: One Christmas at Shiloh

Martha Maria Mixon was a “widder lady.” So she described herself whenever anyone asked her as to her status in life. To her more intimate friends she confided that she was not a “weed widder,” but one of the “grass” variety. The story of how her husband, Madison, had never been “No ‘count, even befo’ de wah,” and of his rapid degeneration thereafter, was vividly told.

“De fact of de mattah is,” Mrs. Mixon was wont to say, “my man, Madison, was nevah no han’ to wo’k. He was de settin’—downest man you evah seed. Hit wouldn’t ‘a’ been so bad, but Madison was a lakly man, an’ his tongue wah smoothah dan ile; so hit t’wan’t no shakes fu’ him to fool ol’ Mas’ ‘bout his wo’k an’ git erlong des erbout ez he pleased. Mas’ Madison Mixon, hisse’f, was a mighty ‘dulgent so’t o’ man, an’ he liked a laugh bettah dan anyone in de worl’. Well, my man could mek him laugh, an’ dat was enough fu’ him. I used to lectuah dat man much ‘bout his onshifless ways, but he des went erlong, twell bimeby hyeah come de wah an’ evahthing was broke up. Den w’en hit come time dat Madison had to scramble fu’ hisself, dey wa’nt no scramble in him. He des’ wouldn’t wo’k an’ I had to do evahthing. He allus had what he called some gret scheme, but deh nevah seemed to come to nuffin, an’ once when he got de folks to put some money in somep’n’ dat broke up, dey come put’ nigh tahin’ an’ featherin’ him. Finally, I des got morchully tiahed o’ dat man’s ca’in’ on, an’ I say to him one day, ‘Madison,’ I say, ‘I’m tiahed of all dis foo’ishness, an’ I’m gwine up Norf whaih I kin live an’ be somebody. Ef evah you mek a man out o’ yo’s’e’f, an’ want me, de Bible say ‘Seek an’ you shell receive.’ Cause even den I was a mighty han’ to c’ote de Scripters. Well, I lef’ him, an’ Norf I come, ‘dough it jes’ nigh broke my hea’t, fu’ I sho did love dat black man. De las’ thing I hyeahed o’ him, he had des learned to read an’ write an’ wah runnin’ fu’ de Legislater ‘twell de Klu Klux got aftah him; den I think he ‘signed de nomernation.’”

This was Martha’s story, and the reason that there was no Mr. Mixon with her when she came North, drifted from place to place and finally

became one of New York's large black contingent from the South. To her the lessons of slavery had not been idle ones. Industrious, careful, and hard-working, she soon became prosperous, and when, hunting a spiritual home she settled upon Shiloh Chapel, she was welcomed there as a distinct addition to the large and active membership.

Shiloh was not one of the fashionable churches of the city, but it was primarily a church home for any Southern negro, for in it were representatives of every one of the old slaveholding States. Its pastor was one of those who had not yet got beyond the belief that any temporal preparation for the preaching of the Gospel was unnecessary. It was still his firm trust, and often his boast, that if one opened his mouth the Lord would fill it, and it grew to be a settled idea that the Lord filled his acceptably, for his converts were many and his congregation increased.

The Rev. Silas Todbury's education may have been deficient in other matters, but one thing he knew, and knew thoroughly—the disposition of his people. He knew just what weaknesses, longings, and desires their recent bondage had left with them, and with admirable shrewdness contrived to meet them. He knew that in preaching they wanted noise, emotion, and fire; that in the preacher they wanted free-heartedness and cordiality. He knew that when Christmas came they wanted a great rally, somewhat approaching, at least, the rousing times both spiritual and temporal that they had had back on the old plantation, when Christmas meant a week of pleasurable excitement. Knowing the last so well, it was with commendable foresight that he began early his preparations for a big time on a certain Christmas not long ago.

“I tell you people,” he said to his congregation, “we's goin' to have a reg'lar 'Benjamin's mess'!”

The coloured folk, being not quite sure of the quotation, laughed heartily, exclaiming in admiration of their pastor, “Dat Todbu’y is sholy one mess hisse’f.”

“Now any of de sistahs dat’s willin’ to he’p mek dis comin’ Chris’mus a real sho ‘nough one, ‘ll ‘blige me by meetin’ me in de basement of de chu’ch aftah services. De brothahs kin go ‘long home ‘twell dey called fu’.”

There was another outburst of merriment at this sally, and it was a good-natured score or more of sisters who a little later met the pastor as agreed. Among them was Martha Maria Mixon, for she was very close to her pastor, and for many a day had joyed his clerical heart with special dinners.

“Ah,” said the preacher, rubbing his hands, “Sistah Marthy, I see you’s on han’ ez usual to he’p me out, an’ you, too, Sis Jinny, an’ Sis Dicey,” he added, quick to note the signs of any incipient jealousy, and equally ready to check it. “We’s all hyeah, de faithful few, an’ we’s all ready fu’ wo’k.”

The sisters beamed and nodded.

“Well, we goin’ to have some’p’n evah night, beginnin’ wid Chris’mus night, straight on endurin’ of de week, an’ I want to separate you all into companies fu’ to take chawge of each night. Now, I’s a–goin’ to have a powahful preachah f’om de Souf wid us, an’ I want you all to show him what we kin do. On Chris’mus day we goin’ to have a sermont at de chu’ch an’ a festabal in de evenin’ wid a Chris’mus tree. Sis’ Marthy, I want you to boa’d de minister.”

“La, Brothah Todbu’y, I don’t scarcely feel lak I’s ‘portant ‘nough fu’ dat,” said Mrs. Mixon modestly, “but I’ll do de bes’ I kin. I hatter be lak de widder’s mice in de scuse o’ meal.”

“We ain’t got no doubt ‘bout what you able to do, Sis Marthy,” and the pastor passed to the appointment of his other committees. After evening services the brothers were similarly called in consultation and appointed to their respective duties.

To the black people to whom these responsibilities were thus turned over, joy came, and with it the vision of other days—the vision of the dear old days, the hard old days back there in the South, when they had looked forward to their Christmas from year to year. Then it had been a time of sadness as well as of joy, for they knew that though the week was full of pleasure, after it was over must come separation and sadness. For this was the time when those who were to be hired out, loaned, or given away, were to change their homes. So even while they danced they sighed, and while they shouted they moaned. Now there was no such repressing fact to daunt them. Christmas would come. They would enjoy themselves, and after it was over would go back to the same homes to live through the round of months in the midst of familiar faces and among their own old loved ones. The thought gave sweetness to their labour, and the responsibilities devolving upon them imbued the sacred holiday with a meaning and charm that it had never had before for them. They bubbled over with importance and with the glory of it. A sister and a brother could not meet without a friendly banter.

“Hi, Sis’ Dicey,” Brother Williams would call out across the fence to his neighbour, “I don’ believe you doin’ anything to’ds dat Chris’mus celebration. Evah time I sees you, you’s in de washtub tryin’ to mek braid an’ meat fo’ dat no ‘count man o’ yo’n.”

Sister Dicey’s laugh rang out loud and musical before she replied, “Nevah you min’, Brothah Williams. I don’ see yo’ back bowed so much by de yoke.”

“Oh, honey, I’s labo’in’ even ef you do’n know it, but you’ll see it on de day.”

“I ‘low you labo’ in’ de mos’ to git dat wife o’ yo’n a new dress,” and her tormentor’s guffaw seemed to admit some such benevolent intention.

In the corners of every house where the younger and more worldly-minded people congregated there was much whispering and giggling, for they had their own plans for Christmas outside of the church affair.

“You goin’ to give me de pleasure of yo’ comp’ny to de dance aftah de festabal?” some ardent and early swain would murmur to his lady love, and the whisper would fly back in well-feigned affright, “Heish, man, you want to have Brothah Todbu’y chu’ chin’ me?” But if the swain persisted, there was little chance of his being ultimately refused. So the world, the flesh, and the devil kept pace with the things of the spirit in the great preparation.

Meanwhile Martha Maria Mixon went her own way, working hard, fixing and observing. She had determined to excel herself this time, and not only should her part at the church be above reproach, but the entertainment which she would give that strange preacher would be a thing long to be remembered. And so, almost startled at all that Shiloh was preparing for his reception, hoary Christmas approached.

All New York was a dazzling bazar through which the people thronged ceaselessly, tumultuously. Everyone was a child again; holly wreaths with the red berries gleaming amid the green were everywhere, and the white streets were gay with laughter and bustle and life.

On the night before the great day Martha sat before her fire and hummed softly to herself. There was a smile upon her face, for she had worked and worked well, and now all was ready and to her entire satisfaction. Something which shall be nameless simmered in a tin cup on the back of the stove before her, and every now and then she broke her reverie to sip of it. It smelled sweet and pungent and suspicious, but, then—this was Christmas Eve. She was half drowsing when a brisk knock startled her

into wakefulness. Thinking it was one of the neighbours in for a call she bade the visitor enter, without moving. There was a stamping of feet, and the door opened and a black man covered with snow stood before her. He said nothing. Martha rubbed her eyes and stared at him, and then she looked at the cup accusingly, and from it back to the man. Then she rubbed her eyes again.

“Wha—wha— —” she stammered, rising slowly.

“Don’ you know me, Marthy, don’ you know me; an’ don’ you want to see yo’ husban’?”

“Madison Mixon, is dat you in de flesh?”

“It’s me, Marthy; you tol’ me ef evah I made a man o’ myse’f, to seek you. It’s been a long road, but I’s tried faithful.”

All the memories of other days came rushing over Martha in an overwhelming flood. In one moment everything was forgotten save that here stood her long delinquent husband. She threw out her arms and took a step toward him, but he anticipated her further advance and rushing to her clasped her ample form in a close embrace.

“You will tek me back!” he cried, “you will fu’give me!”

“Yes, yes, of co’se, I will, Madison, ef you has made a man of yo’s’e’f.”

“I hopes to prove dat to you.”

It was a very pleasant evening that they spent together, and like old times to Martha. Never once did it occur to her that this sudden finding of a husband might be awkward on the morrow when the visitor came to dinner. Nor did she once suspect that Madison might be up to one of his old tricks. She accepted him for just what he said he was and intended to be.

Her first doubt came the next morning when she began to hurry her preparations for church. Madison had been fumbling in his carpet bag and was already respectably dressed. His wife looked at him approvingly, but the glance turned to one of consternation when he stammered forth that he had to go out, as he had some business to attend to.

“What, on de ve’y fust day you hyeah, ain’t you goin’ to chu’ch wid me?”

“De bus’ness is mighty pressin’, but I hopes to see you at chu’ch by de time de services begin. Waih does you set?” His hand was on the door.

Martha sank into a chair and the tears came to her eyes, but she choked them back. She would not let him see how much she was hurt. She told him in a faltering voice where she sat, and he passed out. Then her tears came and flooded away the last hope. She had been so proud to think that she would walk to church with her husband that morning for the first time in so long a while, and now it was all over. For a little while she thought that she would not go, and then the memory of all the preparations she had made and of the new minister came to her, and she went on with her dressing.

The church was crowded that morning when Martha arrived. She looked around in vain for some sight of Madison, but she could see nothing of him, and so she sank into her seat with a sigh. She could just see the new minister drooping in his seat behind the reading desk. He was evidently deep in meditation, for he did not get up during the hymn.

Then Martha heard the Rev. Silas Todbury speaking. His words did not affect her until she found that the whole of his closing sentence was flashing through her brain like a flame. “We will now be exho’ted by de Reverent Madison Mixon.”

She couldn't believe her ears, but stared wildly at the pulpit where the new preacher stood. It was Madison. Her first impulse was to rise in her seat and stop him. It was another of his tricks, and he should not profane the church. But his look and voice silenced her and she sank back in amazement.

He preached a powerful sermon, and at its close told something of his life and who he was, and Martha found herself all at once the centre of attention; and her face glowed and her heart burned within her as the people about her nodded and smiled at her through their tears, and hurled "Amen" upon "Amen."

Madison hurried to her side after the services. "I des wanted to s'prise you a little, Marthy," he said.

She was too happy to answer and, pressing his arm very tightly, she walked out among her congratulating friends, and between her husband and the Rev. Silas Todbury went proudly home to her Christmas dinner.