The Heart of Happy Hollow

by

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Chapter 5: Old Abe's Conversation

The Negro population of the little Southern town of Danvers was in a state of excitement such as it seldom reached except at revivals, baptisms, or on Emancipation Day. The cause of the commotion was the anticipated return of the Rev. Abram Dixon's only son, Robert, who, having taken up his father's life–work and graduated at one of the schools, had been called to a city church.

When Robert's ambition to take a college course first became the subject of the village gossip, some said that it was an attempt to force Providence. If Robert were called to preach, they said, he would be endowed with the power from on high, and no intervention of the schools was necessary. Abram Dixon himself had at first rather leaned to this side of the case. He had expressed his firm belief in the theory that if you opened your mouth, the Lord would fill it. As for him, he had no thought of what he should say to his people when he rose to speak. He trusted to the inspiration of the moment, and dashed blindly into speech, coherent or otherwise.

Himself a plantation exhorter of the ancient type, he had known no school except the fields where he had ploughed and sowed, the woods and the overhanging sky. He had sat under no teacher except the birds and the trees and the winds of heaven. If he did not fail utterly, if his labour was not without fruit, it was because he lived close to nature, and so, near to nature's God. With him religion was a matter of emotion, and he relied for his results more upon a command of feeling than upon an appeal to reason. So it was not strange that he should look upon his son's determination to learn to be a preacher as unjustified by the real demands of the ministry.

But as the boy had a will of his own and his father a boundless pride in him, the day came when, despite wagging heads, Robert Dixon went away to be enrolled among the students of a growing college. Since then six years had passed. Robert had spent his school vacations in teaching;

and now, for the first time, he was coming home, a full–fledged minister of the gospel.

It was rather a shock to the old man's sensibilities that his son's congregation should give him a vacation, and that the young minister should accept; but he consented to regard it as of the new order of things, and was glad that he was to have his boy with him again, although he murmured to himself, as he read his son's letter through his bone–bowed spectacles: "Vacation, vacation, an' I wonder ef he reckons de devil's goin' to take one at de same time?"

It was a joyous meeting between father and son. The old man held his boy off and looked at him with proud eyes.

"Why, Robbie," he said, "you—you's a man!"

"That's what I'm trying to be, father." The young man's voice was deep, and comported well with his fine chest and broad shoulders.

"You's a bigger man den yo' father ever was!" said his mother admiringly.

"Oh, well, father never had the advantage of playing football."

The father turned on him aghast. "Playin' football!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to tell me dat dey 'lowed men learnin' to be preachers to play sich games?"

"Oh, yes, they believe in a sound mind in a sound body, and one seems to be as necessary as the other in fighting evil."

Abram Dixon shook his head solemnly. The world was turning upside down for him.

"Football!" he muttered, as they sat down to supper.

Robert was sorry that he had spoken of the game, because he saw that it grieved his father. He had come intending to avoid rather than to combat his parent's prejudices. There was no condescension in his thought of them and their ways. They were different; that was all. He had learned new ways. They had retained the old. Even to himself he did not say, "But my way is the better one."

His father was very full of eager curiosity as to his son's conduct of his church, and the son was equally glad to talk of his work, for his whole soul was in it.

"We do a good deal in the way of charity work among the churchless and almost homeless city children; and, father, it would do your heart good if you could only see the little ones gathered together learning the first principles of decent living."

"Mebbe so," replied the father doubtfully, "but what you doin' in de way of teachin' dem to die decent?"

The son hesitated for a moment, and then he answered gently, "We think that one is the companion of the other, and that the best way to prepare them for the future is to keep them clean and good in the present."

"Do you give 'em good strong doctern, er do you give 'em milk and water?"

"I try to tell them the truth as I see it and believe it. I try to hold up before them the right and the good and the clean and beautiful."

>"Humph!" exclaimed the old man, and a look of suspicion flashed across his dusky face. "I want you to preach fer me Sunday."

It was as if he had said, "I have no faith in your style of preaching the gospel. I am going to put you to the test."

Robert faltered. He knew his preaching would not please his father or his people, and he shrank from the ordeal. It seemed like setting them all at defiance and attempting to enforce his ideas over their own. Then a perception of his cowardice struck him, and he threw off the feeling that was possessing him. He looked up to find his father watching him keenly, and he remembered that he had not yet answered.

"I had not thought of preaching here," he said, "but I will relieve you if you wish it."

"De folks will want to hyeah you an' see what you kin do," pursued his father tactlessly. "You know dey was a lot of 'em dat said I oughn't ha' let you go away to school. I hope you'll silence 'em."

Robert thought of the opposition his father's friends had shown to his ambitions, and his face grew hot at the memory. He felt his entire inability to please them now.

"I don't know, father, that I can silence those who opposed my going away or even please those who didn't, but I shall try to please One."

It was now Thursday evening, and he had until Saturday night to prepare his sermon. He knew Danvers, and remembered what a chill fell on its congregations, white or black, when a preacher appeared before them with a manuscript or notes. So, out of concession to their prejudices, he decided not to write his sermon, but to go through it carefully and get it well in hand. His work was often interfered with by the frequent summons to see old friends who stayed long, not talking much, but looking at him with some awe and a good deal of contempt. His trial was a little sorer than he had expected, but he bore it all with the good–natured philosophy which his school life and work in a city had taught him.

The Sunday dawned, a beautiful, Southern summer morning; the lazy hum of the bees and the scent of wild honeysuckle were in the air; the

Sabbath was full of the quiet and peace of God; and yet the congregation which filled the little chapel at Danvers came with restless and turbulent hearts, and their faces said plainly: "Rob Dixon, we have not come here to listen to God's word. We have come here to put you on trial. Do you hear? On trial."

And the thought, "On trial," was ringing in the young minister's mind as he rose to speak to them. His sermon was a very quiet, practical one; a sermon that sought to bring religion before them as a matter of every–day life. It was altogether different from the torrent of speech that usually flowed from that pulpit. The people grew restless under this spiritual reserve. They wanted something to sanction, something to shout for, and here was this man talking to them as simply and quietly as if he were not in church.

As Uncle Isham Jones said, "De man never fetched an amen"; and the people resented his ineffectiveness. Even Robert's father sat with his head bowed in his hands, broken and ashamed of his son; and when, without a flourish, the preacher sat down, after talking twenty–two minutes by the clock, a shiver of surprise ran over the whole church. His father had never pounded the desk for less than an hour.

Disappointment, even disgust, was written on every face. The singing was spiritless, and as the people filed out of church and gathered in knots about the door, the old–time head–shaking was resumed, and the comments were many and unfavourable.

"Dat's what his schoolin' done fo' him," said one.

"It wasn't nothin' mo'n a lecter," was another's criticism.

"Put him 'side o' his father," said one of the Rev. Abram Dixon's loyal members, "and bless my soul, de ol' man would preach all roun' him, and he ain't been to no college, neither!"

Robert and his father walked home in silence together. When they were in the house, the old man turned to his son and said:

“Is dat de way dey teach you to preach at college?”

“I followed my instructions as nearly as possible, father.”

“Well, Lawd he’p dey preachin’, den! Why, befo’ I’d ha’ been in dat pulpit five minutes, I’d ha’ had dem people moanin’ an’ hollerin’ all over de church.”

“And would they have lived any more cleanly the next day?”

The old man looked at his son sadly, and shook his head as at one of the unenlightened.

Robert did not preach in his father’s church again before his visit came to a close; but before going he said, “I want you to promise me you’ll come up and visit me, father. I want you to see the work I am trying to do. I don’t say that my way is best or that my work is a higher work, but I do want you to see that I am in earnest.”

“I ain’t doubtin’ you mean well, Robbie,” said his father, “but I guess I’d be a good deal out o’ place up thaih.”

“No, you wouldn’t, father. You come up and see me. Promise me.”

And the old man promised.

It was not, however, until nearly a year later that the Rev. Abram Dixon went up to visit his son’s church. Robert met him at the station, and took him to the little parsonage which the young clergyman’s people had provided for him. It was a very simple place, and an aged woman served the young man as cook and caretaker; but Abram Dixon was astonished at what seemed to him both vainglory and extravagance.

“Ain’t you livin’ kin’ o’ high fo’ yo’ raisin’, Robbie?” he asked.

The young man laughed. “If you’d see how some of the people live here, father, you’d hardly say so.”

Abram looked at the chintz–covered sofa and shook his head at its luxury, but Robert, on coming back after a brief absence, found his father sound asleep upon the comfortable lounge.

On the next day they went out together to see something of the city. By the habit of years, Abram Dixon was an early riser, and his son was like him; so they were abroad somewhat before business was astir in the town. They walked through the commercial portion and down along the wharves and levees. On every side the same sight assailed their eyes: black boys of all ages and sizes, the waifs and strays of the city, lay stretched here and there on the wharves or curled on doorsills, stealing what sleep they could before the relentless day should drive them forth to beg a pittance for subsistence.

“Such as these we try to get into our flock and do something for,” said Robert.

His father looked on sympathetically, and yet hardly with full understanding. There was poverty in his own little village, yes, even squalour, but he had never seen anything just like this. At home almost everyone found some open door, and rare was the wanderer who slept out–of–doors except from choice.

At nine o’clock they went to the police court, and the old minister saw many of his race appear as prisoners, receiving brief attention and long sentences. Finally a boy was arraigned for theft. He was a little, wobegone fellow hardly ten years of age. He was charged with stealing cakes from a bakery. The judge was about to deal with him as quickly as with the others, and Abram’s heart bled for the child, when he saw a negro call the judge’s attention. He turned to find that Robert had left his

side. There was a whispered consultation, and then the old preacher heard with joy, "As this is his first offence and a trustworthy person comes forward to take charge of him, sentence upon the prisoner will be suspended."

Robert came back to his father holding the boy by the hand, and together they made their way from the crowded room.

"I'm so glad! I'm so glad!" said the old man brokenly.

"We often have to do this. We try to save them from the first contact with the prison and all that it means. There is no reformatory for black boys here, and they may not go to the institutions for the white; so for the slightest offence they are sent to jail, where they are placed with the most hardened criminals. When released they are branded forever, and their course is usually downward."

He spoke in a low voice, that what he said might not reach the ears of the little ragamuffin who trudged by his side.

Abram looked down on the child with a sympathetic heart.

"What made you steal dem cakes?" he asked kindly.

"I was hongry," was the simple reply.

The old man said no more until he had reached the parsonage, and then when he saw how the little fellow ate and how tenderly his son ministered to him, he murmured to himself, "Feed my lambs"; and then turning to his son, he said, "Robbie, dey's some'p'n in 'dis, dey's some'p'n in it, I tell you."

That night there was a boy's class in the lower room of Robert Dixon's little church. Boys of all sorts and conditions were there, and Abram listened as his son told them the old, sweet stories in the simplest

possible manner and talked to them in his cheery, practical way. The old preacher looked into the eyes of the street gamins about him, and he began to wonder. Some of them were fierce, unruly–looking youngsters, inclined to meanness and rowdyism, but one and all, they seemed under the spell of their leader's voice. At last Robert said, "Boys, this is my father. He's a preacher, too. I want you to come up and shake hands with him." Then they crowded round the old man readily and heartily, and when they were outside the church, he heard them pause for a moment, and then three rousing cheers rang out with the vociferated explanation, "Fo' de minister's pap!"

Abram held his son's hand long that night, and looked with tear–dimmed eyes at the boy.

"I didn't understan'," he said. "I didn't understan'."

"You'll preach for me Sunday, father?"

"I wouldn't daih, honey. I wouldn't daih."

"Oh, yes, you will, pap."

He had not used the word for a long time, and at sound of it his father yielded.

It was a strange service that Sunday morning. The son introduced the father, and the father, looking at his son, who seemed so short a time ago unlearned in the ways of the world, gave as his text, "A little child shall lead them."

He spoke of his own conceit and vainglory, the pride of his age and experience, and then he told of the lesson he had learned. "Why, people," he said, "I feels like a new convert!"

It was a gentler gospel than he had ever preached before, and in the congregation there were many eyes as wet as his own.

“Robbie,” he said, when the service was over, “I believe I had to come up here to be converted.” And Robbie smiled.