



# **THE HEART OF HAPPY HOLLOW**

by

Paul Laurence Dunbar

**Chapter 7: A Defender of the Faith**

There was a very animated discussion going on, on the lower floor of the house Number Ten “D” Street. House Number Ten was the middle one of a row of more frames, which formed what was put down on the real estate agent’s list as a coloured neighbourhood. The inhabitants of the little cottages were people so poor that they were constantly staggering on the verge of the abyss, which they had been taught to dread and scorn, and why, clearly. Life with them was no dream, but a hard, terrible reality, which meant increasing struggle, and little wonder then that the children of such parents should see the day before Christmas come without hope of any holiday cheer.

Christmas; what did it mean to them? The pitiful little dark rag–muffins, save that the happy, well–dressed people who passed the shanties seemed further away from their life, save that mother toiled later in the evening at her work, if there was work, and that father drank more gin and prayed louder in consequence; save that, perhaps—and there was always a donation—that there might be a little increase in the amount of cold victuals that big sister brought home, and there might be turkey–dressing in it.

But there was a warm discussion in Number Ten, and that is the principal thing. The next in importance is that Miss Arabella Coe, reporter, who had been down that way looking mainly for a Christmas story, heard the sound of voices raised in debate, and paused to listen. It was not a very polite thing for Miss Coe to do, but then Miss Coe was a reporter and reporters are not scrupulous about being polite when there is anything to hear. Besides, the pitch to which the lusty young voices within were raised argued that the owners did not care if the outside world shared in the conversation. So Arabella listened, and after a while she passed through the gate and peeped into the room between the broken slats of a shutter.

It was a mean little place, quite what might be expected from its exterior. A cook stove sat in the middle of the floor with a smoky fire in it, and

about it were clustered four or five black children ranging from a toddler of two to a boy of ten. They all showed differing degrees of dirt and raggedness, but all were far and beyond the point of respectability.

One of the group, the older boy, sat upon the bed and was holding forth to his brothers and sisters not without many murmurs of doubt and disbelief.

“No,” he was saying, “I tell you dey hain’t no such thing as a Santy Claus. Dat’s somep’n dat yo’ folks jes’ git up to make you be good long ‘bout Christmas time. I know.”

“But, Tom, you know what mammy said,” said a dreamy-eyed little chap, who sat on a broken stool with his chin on his hands.

“Aw, mammy,” said the orator, “she’s jes’ a-stuffin’ you. She don’ believe in no Santy Claus hersel’, less’n why’nt he bring huh de dress she prayed fu’ last Christmas.” He was very wise, this old man of ten years, and he had sold papers on the avenue where many things are learned, both good and bad.

“But what you got to say about pappy?” pursued the believer. “He say dey’s a Santy Claus, and dat he comes down de chimbly; and— —”

“Whut’s de mattah wid you; look at dat stove pipe; how you s’pose anybody go’n’ to git in hyeah th’oo de chimbly?”

They all looked up at the narrow, rusty stove pipe and the sigh of hopelessness brought the tears to Arabella’s eyes. The children seemed utterly nonplussed, and Tom was swelling at his triumph. “How’s any Santy Claus go’n’ to come down th’oo that, I want to know,” he repeated.

But the faith of childhood is stronger than reason. Tom's little sister piped up, "I don't know how, but he comes th'roo' that away anyhow. He brung Mamie Davith a doll and it had thoot on it out o' the chimbly."

It was now Tom's turn to be stumped, but he wouldn't let it be known. He only said, "Aw," contemptuously and coughed for more crushing arguments.

"I knows dey's a Santy Claus," said dreamy-eyed Sam.

"Ef dey is why'n't he never come here?" retorted Tom.

"I jes' been thinkin' maybe ouah house is so little he miss it in de night; dey says he's a ol' man an' I 'low his sight ain' good."

Tom was stricken into silence for a moment by this entirely new view of the matter, and then finding no answer to it, he said "Aw" again and looked superior, but warningly so.

"Maybe Thanty's white an' don' go to see col'red people," said the little girl.

"But I do know coloured people's houses he's been at," contended Sam. "Aw, dem col'red folks dat's got the money, dem's de only ones dat Santy Claus fin's, you bet."

Arabella at the window shuddered at the tone of the sceptic; it reminded her so much of the world she knew, and it was hard to believe that her friends who prided themselves on their unbelief could have anything in common with a little coloured newsboy down on "D" Street.

"Tell you what," said Sam again, "let's try an' see if dey is a Santy. We'll put a light in the winder, so if he's ol' he can see us anyhow, an' we'll pray right hard fu' him to come."

“Aw,” said Tom.

“Ith been good all thish month,” chirped the little girl.

The other children joined with enthusiasm in Sam’s plan, though Tom sat upon the bed and looked scornfully on.

Arabella escaped from the window just as Sam brought the smoky lamp and set it on the sill, but she still stood outside the palings of the fence and looked in. She saw four little forms get down on their knees and she crept up near again to hear.

Following Sam’s lead they began, “Oh, Santy,” but Tom’s voice broke in, “Don’t you know the Lord don’t ‘low you to pray to nobody but Him?”

Sam paused, puzzled for a minute, then he led on: “Please ‘scuse, good Lord, we started wrong, but won’t you please, sir, send Santy Clause around. Amen.” And they got up from their knees satisfied.

“Aw,” said Tom as Arabella was turning wet-eyed away.

It was a good thing the reporter left as soon as she did, for in a few minutes a big woman pushed in at the gate and entered the house.

“Mammy, mammy,” shrieked the children.

“Lawsy, me,” said Martha, laughing, “who evah did see sich children? Bless dey hearts, an’ dey done sot dey lamp in de winder, too, so’s dey po’ ol’ mammy kin see to git in.”

As she spoke she was taking the lamp away to set it on the table where she had placed her basket, but the cry of the children stopped her. “Oh, no, mammy, don’t take it, don’t take it, dat’s to light Santy Claus in.”

She paused a minute bewildered and then the light broke over her face. She smiled and then a rush of tears quenched the smile. She gathered the children into her arms and said, "I's feared, honey, ol' man Santy ain' gwine fu' you to-night."

"Wah'd I tell you?" sneered Tom.

"You hush yo' mouf," said his mother, and she left the lamp where it was.

As Arabella Coe wended her way home that night her brain was busy with many thoughts. "I've got my story at last," she told herself, "and I'll go on up and write it." But she did not go up to write it. She came to the parting of the ways. One led home, the other to the newspaper office where she worked. She laughed nervously, and took the former way. Once in her room she went through her small store of savings. There was very little there, then she looked down ruefully at her worn boots. She did need a new pair. Then, holding her money in her hand, she sat down to think.

"It's really a shame," she said to herself, "those children will have no Christmas at all, and they'll never believe in Santa Claus again. They will lose their faith forever and from this it will go to other things." She sat there dreaming for a long while and the vision of a very different childhood came before her eyes.

"Dear old place," she murmured softly, "I believed in Santa Claus until I was thirteen, and that oldest boy is scarcely ten." Suddenly she sprung to her feet. "Hooray," she cried, "I'll be defender of the faith," and she went out into the lighted streets again.

The shopkeepers looked queerly at Arabella that night as she bought as if she were the mother of a large and growing family, and she appeared too young for that. Finally, there was a dress for mother.

She carried them down on “D” Street and placed them stealthily at the door of Number Ten. She put a note among the things, which read: “I am getting old and didn’t see your house last year, also I am getting fat and couldn’t get down that little stove pipe of yours this year. You must excuse me. Santa Claus.” Then looking wilfully at her shoes, but nevertheless with a glow on her face, she went up to the office to write her story.

There were joyous times at Number Ten the next day. Mother was really surprised, and the children saw it.

“Wha’d I tell you,” said dreamy Sam.

Tom said nothing then, but when he went down to the avenue to sell the morning papers, all resplendent in a new muffler, he strode up to a boy and remarked belligerently, “Say, if you says de ain’t no Santy Claus again, I’ll punch yo’ head.”