



THE HEART OF HAPPY HOLLOW

by

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Chapter 8: Cahoots

In the centre of the quaint old Virginia grave-yard stood two monuments side by side—two plain granite shafts exactly alike. On one was inscribed the name Robert Vaughan Fairfax and the year 1864. On the other was the simple and perplexing inscription, “Cahoots.” Nothing more.

The place had been the orchard of one of the ante-bellum mansions before the dead that were brought back from the terrible field of Malvern Hill and laid there had given it a start as a cemetery. Many familiar names were chiselled on the granite head-stones, and anyone conversant with Virginia genealogy would have known them to belong to some of the best families of the Old Dominion. But “Cahoots,”—who or what was he?

My interest, not to say curiosity, was aroused. There must be a whole story in those two shafts with their simple inscriptions, a life-drama or perhaps a tragedy. And who was more likely to know it than the postmaster of the quaint little old town. Just after the war, as if tired with its exertions to repel the invader, the old place had fallen asleep and was still drowsing.

I left the cemetery—if such it could be called—and wended my way up the main street to the ancient building which did duty as post-office. The man in charge, a grizzled old fellow with an empty sleeve, sat behind a small screen. He looked up as I entered and put out his hand toward the mailboxes, waiting for me to mention my name. But instead I said: “I am not expecting any mail. I only wanted to ask a few questions.”

“Well, sir, what can I do for you?” he asked with some interest.

“I’ve just been up there walking through the cemetery,” I returned, “and I am anxious to know the story, if there be one, of two monuments which I saw there.”

“You mean Fairfax and Cahoots.”

“Yes.”

“You’re a stranger about here, of course.”

“Yes,” I said again, “and so there is a story?”

“There is a story and I’ll tell it to you. Come in and sit down.” He opened a wire door into his little cage, and I seated myself on a stool and gave my attention to him.

“It’s just such a story,” he began, “as you can hear in any of the Southern States—wherever there were good masters and faithful slaves. This particular tale is a part of our county history, and there ain’t one of the old residents but could tell it to you word for word and fact for fact. In the days before our misunderstanding with the North, the Fairfaxes were the leading people in this section. By leading, I mean not only the wealthiest, not only the biggest land-owners, but that their name counted for more in social circles and political councils than any other hereabout. It is natural to expect that such a family should wish to preserve its own name down a direct line. So it was a source of great grief to old Fairfax that his first three children were girls, pretty, healthy, plump enough little things, but girls for all that, and consequently a disappointment to their father’s pride of family. When the fourth child came and it proved to be a boy, the Fairfax plantation couldn’t hold the Fairfax joy and it flowed out and mellowed the whole county.

“They do say that Fairfax Fairfax was in one of his further tobacco fields when the good news was brought to him, and that after giving orders that all the darkies should knock off work and take a holiday, in his haste and excitement he jumped down from his horse and ran all the way to the house. I give the story only for what it is worth. But if it is true, it is the first case of a man of that name and family forgetting himself in an emergency.

“Well, of course, the advent of a young male Fairfax would under any circumstances have proven a great event, although it was afterwards duplicated, but there would have been no story to tell, there would have been no ‘Cahoots,’ if by some fortuitous circumstance one of the slave women had not happened to bring into the world that day and almost at the same time that her mistress was introducing young Vaughan Fairfax to the light, a little black pickaninny of her own. Well, if you’re a Southern man, and I take it that you are, you know that nothing ever happens in the quarters that the big house doesn’t know. So the news was soon at the white father’s ears and nothing would do him but that the black baby must be brought to the house and be introduced to the white one. The little black fellow came in all rolled in his bundle of shawls and was laid for a few minutes beside his little lord and master. Side by side they lay blinking at the light equally strange to both, and then the master took the black child’s hand and put it in that of the white’s. With the convulsive gesture common to babyhood the little hands clutched in a feeble grasp.

”Dah now,’ old Doshy said—she was the nurse that had brought the pickaninny up—’dey done tol’ each othah howdy.’

”Told each other howdy nothing,’ said old Fairfax solemnly, ‘they have made a silent compact of eternal friendship, and I propose to ratify it right here.’

“He was a religious man, and so there with all the darkies clustered around in superstitious awe, and with the white face of his wife looking at him from among the pillows, he knelt and offered a prayer, and asked a blessing upon the two children just come into the world. And through it all those diminutive specimens of humanity lay there blinking with their hands still clasped.

“Well, they named the white child Robert Vaughan, and they began calling the little darky Ben, until an incident in later life gave him the

name that clung to him till the last, and which the Fairfaxes have had chiseled on his tomb—stone.

“The incident occurred when the two boys were about five years old. They were as thick as thieves, and two greater scamps and greater cronies never tramped together over a Virginia plantation. In the matter of deviltry they were remarkably precocious, and it was really wonderful what an amount of mischief those two could do. As was natural, the white boy planned the deeds, and the black one was his willing coadjutor in carrying them out.

“Meanwhile, the proud father was smilingly indulgent to their pranks, but even with him the climax was reached when one of his fine young hounds was nearly driven into fits by the clatter of a tin can tied to its tail. Then the two culprits were summoned to appear before the paternal court of inquiry.

“They came hand in hand, and with no great show of fear or embarrassment. They had gotten off so many times before that they were perfectly confident of their power in this case to cajole the judge. But to their surprise he was all sternness and severity.

””Now look here,’ he said, after expatiating on the cruel treatment which the dog had received. ‘I want to know which one of you tied the can to Spot’s tail?’

“Robert Vaughan looked at Ben, and Ben looked back at him. Silence there, and nothing more.

””Do you hear my question?’ old Fairfax asked with rising voice.

“Robert Vaughan looked straight ahead of him, and Ben dug his big toe into the sand at the foot of the veranda, but neither answered.

”Robert Vaughan Fairfax,’ said his father, ‘who played that trick on Spot? Answer me, do you hear?’

“The Fairfax heir seemed suddenly to have grown deaf and dumb, and the father turned to the black boy. His voice took on the tone of command which he had hardly used to his son. ‘Who played that trick on Spot? Answer me, Ben.’

“The little darky dug harder and harder into the sand, and flashed a furtive glance from under his brows at his fellow-conspirator. Then he drawled out, ‘I done it.’

”You didn’t,’ came back the instant retort from his young master, ‘I did it myself.’

”I done it,’ repeated Ben, and ‘You didn’t,’ reiterated his young master.

“The father sat and looked on at the dispute, and his mouth twitched suspiciously, but he spoke up sternly. ‘Well, if I can’t get the truth out of you this way, I’ll try some other plan. Mandy,’ he hailed a servant, ‘put these boys on a diet of bread and water until they are ready to answer my questions truthfully.’

“The culprits were led away to their punishment. Of course it would have just been meat to Mandy to have stolen something to the youngsters, but her master kept such a close eye upon her that she couldn’t, and when brought back at the end of three hours, their fare had left the prisoners rather hungry. But they had evidently disputed the matter between themselves, and from the cloud on their faces when they reappeared before their stern judge, it was still unsettled.

“To the repetition of the question, Vaughan answered again, ‘I did it,’ and then his father tried Ben again.

“After several efforts, and an imploring glance at his boy master, the little black stammered out:

””Well, I reckon—I reckon, Mas,’ me an’ Mas’ Vaughan, we done it in cahoots.’

“Old Fairfax Fairfax had a keen sense of humour, and as he looked down on the strangely old young darky and took in his answer, the circumstance became too much for his gravity, and his relaxing laugh sent the culprits rolling and tumbling in the sand in an ecstasy of relief from the strained situation.

””Cahoots—I reckon it was “Cahoots,”” the judge said. ‘You ought to be named that, you little black rascal!’ Well, the story got around, and so it was, and from that day forth the black boy was ‘Cahoots.’ Cahoots, whether on the plantation, at home, in the halls of the Northern College, where he accompanied his young master, or in the tragic moments of the great war—drama played out on the field of Malvern.

“As they were in childhood, so, inseparable through youth and young manhood, Robert Fairfax and Cahoots grew up. They were together in everything, and when the call came that summoned the young Virginian from his college to fight for the banner of his State, Cahoots was the one who changed from the ease of a gentleman’s valet to the hardship of a soldier’s body—servant.

“The last words Fairfax Fairfax said as his son cantered away in his gray suit were addressed to Cahoots: ‘Take good care of your Mas’ Vaughan, Cahoots, and don’t come back without him.’

””I won’t, Mastah,’ Cahoots flung back and galloped after his lifelong companion.

“Well, the war brought hard times both for master and man, and there were no flowery beds of ease even for the officers who wore the gray.

Robert Fairfax took the fortunes of the conflict like a man and a Virginia gentleman, and with him Cahoots.

“It was at Malvern Hill that the young Confederate led his troops into battle, and all day long the booming of the cannon and the crash of musketry rising above the cries of the wounded and dying came to the ears of the slave waiting in his tent for his master’s return. Then in the afternoon a scattered fragment came straggling back into the camp. Cahoots went out to meet them. The firing still went on.

”Whah’s Mas’ Bob?’ his voice pierced through the cannon’s thunder.

”He fell at the front, early in the battle.’

”Whah’s his body den, ef he fell?’

”We didn’t have time to look for dead bodies in that murderous fire. It was all we could do to get our living bodies away.’

”But I promised not to go back without him.’ It was a wail of anguish from the slave.

”Well, you’ll have to.’

”I won’t. Whah did he fall?’

“Someone sketched briefly the approximate locality of Robert Fairfax’s resting place, and on the final word Cahoots tore away.

“The merciless shot of the Federals was still raking the field. But amid it all an old prairie schooner, gotten from God knows where, started out from the dismantled camp across the field. ‘Some fool going to his death,’ said one of the gray soldiers.

“A ragged, tattered remnant of the wagon came back. The horses were bleeding and staggering in their steps. The very harness was cut by the balls that had grazed it. But with a light in his eyes and the look of a hero, Cahoots leaped from the tattered vehicle and began dragging out the body of his master.

“He had found him far to the front in an abandoned position and brought him back over the field of the dead.

””How did you do it?” They asked him.

””I jes’ had to do it,” he said. ‘I promised not to go home widout him, and I didn’t keer ef I did git killed. I wanted to die ef I couldn’t find Mas’ Bob’s body.’

“He carried the body home, and mourned at the burial, and a year later came back to the regiment with the son who had come after Robert, and was now just of fighting age. He went all through this campaign, and when the war was over, the two struck away into the mountains. They came back after a while, neither one having taken the oath of allegiance, and if there were any rebels Cahoots was as great a one to the day of his death as his master. That tomb–stone, you see it looks old, was placed there at the old master’s request when his dead son came home from Malvern Hill, for he said when Cahoots went to the other side they must not be separated; that accounts for its look of age, but it was not until last year that we laid Cahoots—Cahoots still though an old man—beside his master. And many a man that had owned his people, and many another that had fought to continue that ownership, dropped a tear on his grave.”