The Heart of Happy Hollow

by

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Chapter 9: The Promoter

Even as early as September, in the year of 1870, the newly emancipated had awakened to the perception of the commercial advantages of freedom, and had begun to lay snares to catch the fleet and elusive dollar. Those controversialists who say that the Negro's only idea of freedom was to live without work are either wrong, malicious, or they did not know Little Africa when the boom was on; when every little African, fresh from the fields and cabins, dreamed only of untold wealth and of mansions in which he would have been thoroughly uncomfortable. These were the devil's sunny days, and early and late his mowers were in the field. These were the days of benefit societies that only benefited the shrewdest man; of mutual insurance associations, of wild building companies, and of gilt–edged land schemes wherein the unwary became bogged. This also was the day of Mr. Jason Buford, who, having been free before the war, knew a thing or two, and now had set himself up as a promoter. Truly he had profited by the example of the white men for whom he had so long acted as messenger and factotum.

As he frequently remarked when for purposes of business he wished to air his Biblical knowledge, "I jest takes the Scripter fur my motter an' foller that ol' passage where it says, 'Make hay while the sun shines, fur the night cometh when no man kin work.'"

It is related that one of Mr. Buford's customers was an old plantation exhorter. At the first suggestion of a Biblical quotation the old gentleman closed his eyes and got ready with his best amen. But as the import of the words dawned on him he opened his eyes in surprise, and the amen died a–borning. "But do hit say dat?" he asked earnestly.

"It certainly does read that way," said the promoter glibly.

"Uh, huh," replied the old man, settling himself back in his chair. "I been preachin' dat t'ing wrong fu' mo' dan fo'ty yeahs. Dat's whut comes o' not bein' able to read de wo'd fu' yo'se'f."

Buford had no sense of the pathetic or he could never have done what he did—sell to the old gentleman, on the strength of the knowledge he had imparted to him, a house and lot upon terms so easy that he might drowse along for a little time and then wake to find himself both homeless and penniless. This was the promoter's method, and for so long a time had it proved successful that he had now grown mildly affluent and had set up a buggy in which to drive about and see his numerous purchasers and tenants.

Buford was a suave little yellow fellow, with a manner that suggested the training of some old Southern butler father, or at least, an experience as a likely house–boy. He was polite, plausible, and more than all, resourceful. All of this he had been for years, but in all these years he had never so risen to the height of his own uniqueness as when he conceived and carried into execution the idea of the "Buford Colonizing Company."

Humanity has always been looking for an Eldorado, and, however mixed the metaphor may be, has been searching for a Moses to lead it thereto. Behold, then, Jason Buford in the rôle of Moses. And equipped he was to carry off his part with the very best advantage, for though he might not bring water from the rock, he could come as near as any other man to getting blood from a turnip.

The beauty of the man's scheme was that no offering was too small to be accepted. Indeed, all was fish that came to his net.

Think of paying fifty cents down and knowing that some time in the dim future you would be the owner of property in the very heart of a great city where people would rush to buy. It was glowing enough to attract a people more worldly wise than were these late slaves. They simply fell into the scheme with all their souls; and off their half dollars, dollars, and larger sums, Mr. Buford waxed opulent. The land meanwhile did not materialise.

It was just at this time that Sister Jane Callender came upon the scene and made glad the heart of the new–fledged Moses. He had heard of Sister Jane before, and he had greeted her coming with a sparkling of eyes and a rubbing of hands that betokened a joy with a good financial basis.

The truth about the newcomer was that she had just about received her pension, or that due to her deceased husband, and she would therefore be rich, rich to the point where avarice would lie in wait for her.

Sis' Jane settled in Mr. Buford's bailiwick, joined the church he attended, and seemed only waiting with her dollars for the very call which he was destined to make. She was hardly settled in a little three–room cottage before he hastened to her side, kindly intent, or its counterfeit, beaming from his features. He found a weak–looking old lady propped in a great chair, while another stout and healthy–looking woman ministered to her wants or stewed about the house in order to be doing something.

"Ah, which—which is Sis' Jane Callender," he asked, rubbing his hands for all the world like a clothing dealer over a good customer.

"Dat's Sis' Jane in de cheer," said the animated one, pointing to her charge. "She feelin' mighty po'ly dis evenin'. What might be yo' name?" She was promptly told.

"Sis' Jane, hyeah one de good brothahs come to see you to offah his suvices if you need anything."

"Thanky, brothah, charity," said the weak voice, "sit yo'se'f down. You set down, Aunt Dicey. Tain't no use a runnin' roun' waitin' on me. I ain't long fu' dis worl' nohow, mistah."

"Buford is my name an' I came in to see if I could be of any assistance to you, a–fixin' up yo' mattahs er seein' to anything for you."

“Hit’s mighty kind o’ you to come, dough I don’ ‘low I’ll need much fixin’ fu’ now.”

“Oh, we hope you’ll soon be better, Sistah Callender.”

“Nevah no mo’, suh, ‘til I reach the Kingdom.”

“Sis’ Jane Callender, she have been mighty sick,” broke in Aunt Dicey Fairfax, “but I reckon she gwine pull thoo’, the Lawd willin’.”

“Amen,” said Mr. Buford.

“Huh, uh, children, I done hyeahd de washin’ of de waters of Jerdon.”

“No, no, Sistah Callendah, we hope to see you well and happy in de injoyment of de pension dat I understan’ de gov’ment is goin’ to give you.”

“La, chile, I reckon de white folks gwine to git dat money. I ain’t nevah gwine to live to ‘ceive it. Des’ aftah I been wo’kin’ so long fu’ it, too.”

The small eyes of Mr. Buford glittered with anxiety and avarice. What, was this rich plum about to slip from his grasp, just as he was about to pluck it? It should not be. He leaned over the old lady with intense eagerness in his gaze.

“You must live to receive it,” he said, “we need that money for the race. It must not go back to the white folks. Ain’t you got nobody to leave it to?”

“Not a chick ner a chile, ‘ceptin’ Sis’ Dicey Fairfax here.”

Mr. Buford breathed again. “Then leave it to her, by all means,” he said.

“I don’ want to have nothin’ to do with de money of de daid,” said Sis’ Dicey Fairfax.

"Now, don't talk dat away, Sis' Dicey," said the sick woman. "Brother Buford is right, case you sut'ny has been good to me sence I been layin' hyeah on de bed of affliction, an' dey ain't nobody more fitterner to have dat money den you is. Ef de Lawd des lets me live long enough, I's gwine to mek my will in yo' favoh."

"De Lawd's will be done," replied the other with resignation, and Mr. Buford echoed with an "Amen!"

He stayed very long that evening, planning and talking with the two old women, who received his words as the Gospel. Two weeks later the *Ethiopian Banner*, which was the organ of Little Africa, announced that Sis' Jane Callender had received a back pension which amounted to more than five hundred dollars. Thereafter Mr. Buford was seen frequently in the little cottage, until one day, after a lapse of three or four weeks, a policeman entered Sis' Jane Callender's cottage and led her away amidst great excitement to prison. She was charged with pension fraud, and against her protestations, was locked up to await the action of the Grand Jury.

The promoter was very active in his client's behalf, but in spite of all his efforts she was indicted and came up for trial.

It was a great day for the denizens of Little Africa, and they crowded the court room to look upon this stranger who had come among them to grow so rich, and then suddenly to fall so low.

The prosecuting attorney was a young Southerner, and when he saw the prisoner at the bar he started violently, but checked himself. When the prisoner saw him, however, she made no effort at self control.

"Lawd o' mussy," she cried, spreading out her black arms, "if it ain't Miss Lou's little Bobby."

The judge checked the hilarity of the audience; the prosecutor maintained his dignity by main force, and the bailiff succeeded in keeping the old lady in her place, although she admonished him: "Pshaw, chile, you needn't fool wid me, I nussed dat boy's mammy when she borned him."

It was too much for the young attorney, and he would have been less a man if it had not been. He came over and shook her hand warmly, and this time no one laughed.

It was really not worth while prolonging the case, and the prosecution was nervous. The way that old black woman took the court and its officers into her bosom was enough to disconcert any ordinary tribunal. She patronised the judge openly before the hearing began and insisted upon holding a gentle motherly conversation with the foreman of the jury.

She was called to the stand as the very first witness.

"What is your name?" asked the attorney.

"Now, Bobby, what is you axin' me dat fu'? You know what my name is, and you one of de Fairfax fambly, too. I 'low ef yo' mammy was hyeah, she'd mek you 'membah; she'd put you in yo' place."

The judge rapped for order.

"That is just a manner of proceeding," he said; "you must answer the question, so the rest of the court may know."

"Oh, yes, suh, 'scuse me, my name hit's Dicey Fairfax."

The attorney for the defence threw up his hands and turned purple. He had a dozen witnesses there to prove that they had known the woman as Jane Callender.

“But did you not give your name as Jane Callender?”

“I object,” thundered the defence.

“Do, hush, man,” Sis’ Dicey exclaimed, and then turning to the prosecutor, “La, honey, you know Jane Callender ain’t my real name, you knows dat yo’se’f. It’s des my bus’ness name. W’y, Sis’ Jane Callender done daid an’ gone to glory too long ‘go fu’ to talk erbout.”

“Then you admit to the court that your name is not Jane Callender?”

“Wha’s de use o’ my ‘mittin’, don’ you know it yo’se’f, suh? Has I got to come hyeah at dis late day an’ p’ove my name an’ redentify befo’ my ol’ Miss’s own chile? Mas’ Bob, I nevah did t’ink you’d ac’ dat away. Freedom sutny has done tuk erway yo’ mannahs.”

“Yes, yes, yes, that’s all right, but we want to establish the fact that your name is Dicey Fairfax.”

“Cose it is.”

“Your Honor, I object—I— —”

“Your Honor,” said Fairfax coldly, “will you grant me the liberty of conducting the examination in a way somewhat out of the ordinary lines? I believe that my brother for the defence will have nothing to complain of. I believe that I understand the situation and shall be able to get the truth more easily by employing methods that are not altogether technical.”

The court seemed to understand a thing or two himself, and overruled the defence’s objection.

“Now, Mrs. Fairfax— —”

Aunt Dicey snorted. “Hoomph? What? Mis’ Fairfax? What ou say, Bobby Fairfax? What you call me dat fu’? My name Aunt Dicey to you an’ I want you to un’erstan’ dat right hyeah. Ef you keep on foolin’ wid me, I ‘spec’ my patience gwine waih claih out.”

“Excuse me. Well, Aunt Dicey, why did you take the name of Jane Callender if your name is really Dicey Fairfax?”

“W’y, I done tol’ you, Bobby, dat Sis’ Jane Callender was des’ my bus’ness name.”

“Well, how were you to use this business name?”

“Well, it was des dis away. Sis’ Jane Callender, she gwine git huh pension, but la, chile, she tuk down sick unto deaf, an’ Brothah Buford, he say dat she ought to mek a will in favoh of somebody, so’s de money would stay ‘mongst ouah folks, an’ so, bimeby, she ‘greed she mek a will.”

“And who is Brother Buford, Aunt Dicey?”

“Brothah Buford? Oh, he’s de gemman whut come an’ offered to ‘ten’ to Sis’ Jane Callender’s bus’ness fu’ huh. He’s a moughty clevah man.”

“And he told her she ought to make a will?”

“Yas, suh. So she ‘greed she gwine mek a will, an’ she say to me, ‘Sis Dicey, you sut’ny has been good to me sence I been layin’ hyeah on dis bed of ‘fliction, an’ I gwine will all my proputy to you.’ Well, I don’t want to tek de money, an’ she des mos’ nigh fo’ce it on me, so I say yes, an’ Brothah Buford he des sot an’ talk to us, an’ he say dat he come to–morror to bring a lawyer to draw up de will. But bless Gawd, honey, Sis’ Callender died dat night, an’ de will wasn’t made, so when Brothah Buford come bright an’ early next mornin’, I was layin’ Sis’ Callender out. Brothah Buford was mighty much moved, he was. I nevah did see a

strange pusson tek anything so hard in all my life, an' den he talk to me, an' he say, 'Now, Sis' Dicey, is you notified any de neighbours yit?' an' I said no I hain't notified no one of de neighbours, case I ain't 'quainted wid none o' dem yit, an' he say, 'How erbout de doctah? Is he 'quainted wid de diseased?' an' I tol' him no, he des come in, da's all. 'Well,' he say, 'cose you un'erstan' now dat you is Sis' Jane Callender, caise you inhe'it huh name, an' when de doctah come to mek out de 'stiffycate, you mus' tell him dat Sis' Dicey Fairfax is de name of de diseased, an' it'll be all right, an' aftah dis you got to go by de name o' Jane Callender, caise it's a bus'ness name you done inhe'it.' Well, dat's whut I done, an' dat's huccome I been Jane Callender in de bus'ness 'sactions, an' Dicey Fairfax at home. Now, you un'erstan', don't you? It wuz my inhe'ited name."

"But don't you know that what you have done is a penitentiary offence?"

"Who you stan'in' up talkin' to dat erway, you nasty impident little scoun'el? Don't you talk to me dat erway. I reckon ef yo' mammy was hyeah she sut'ny would tend to yo' case. You alluse was sassier an' pearter den yo' brother Nelse, an' he had to go an' git killed in de wah, an' you—you—w'y, jedge, I'se spanked dat boy mo' times den I kin tell you fu' hus impidence. I don't see how you evah gits erlong wid him."

The court repressed a ripple that ran around. But there was no smile on the smooth–shaven, clear–cut face of the young Southerner. Turning to the attorney for the defence, he said: "Will you take the witness?" But that gentleman, waving one helpless hand, shook his head.

"That will do, then," said young Fairfax. "Your Honor," he went on, addressing the court, "I have no desire to prosecute this case further. You all see the trend of it just as I see, and it would be folly to continue the examination of any of the rest of these witnesses. We have got that story from Aunt Dicey herself as straight as an arrow from a bow. While technically she is guilty; while according to the facts she is a criminal

according to the motive and the intent of her actions, she is as innocent as the whitest soul among us." He could not repress the youthful Southerner's love for this little bit of rhetoric.

"And I believe that nothing is to be gained by going further into the matter, save for the purpose of finding out the whereabouts of this Brother Buford, and attending to his case as the facts warrant. But before we do this, I want to see the stamp of crime wiped away from the name of my Aunt Dicey there, and I beg leave of the court to enter a nolle prosse. There is only one other thing I must ask of Aunt Dicey, and that is that she return the money that was illegally gotten, and give us information concerning the whereabouts of Buford."

Aunt Dicey looked up in excitement, "W'y, chile, ef dat money was got illegal, I don' want it, but I do know whut I gwine to do, cause I done 'vested it all wid Brothah Buford in his colorednization comp'ny." The court drew its breath. It had been expecting some such *dénouement*.

"And where is the office of this company situated?"

"Well, I des can't tell dat," said the old lady. "W'y, la, man, Brothah Buford was in co't to–day. Whaih is he? Brothah Buford, whaih you?" But no answer came from the surrounding spectators. Brother Buford had faded away. The old lady, however, after due conventions, was permitted to go home.

It was with joy in her heart that Aunt Dicey Fairfax went back to her little cottage after her dismissal, but her face clouded when soon after Robert Fairfax came in.

"Hyeah you come as usual," she said with well–feigned anger. "Tryin' to sof' soap me aftah you been carryin' on. You ain't changed one mite fu' all yo' bein' a man. What you talk to me dat away in co't fu'?"

Fairfax's face was very grave. "It was necessary, Aunt Dicey," he said. "You know I'm a lawyer now, and there are certain things that lawyers have to do whether they like it or not. You don't understand. That man Buford is a scoundrel, and he came very near leading you into a very dangerous and criminal act. I am glad I was near to save you."

"Oh, honey, chile, I didn't know dat. Set down an' tell me all erbout it."

This the attorney did, and the old lady's indignation blazed forth. "Well, I hope to de Lawd you'll fin' dat rascal an' larrup him ontwell he cain't stan' straight."

"No, we're going to do better than that and a great deal better. If we find him we are going to send him where he won't inveigle any more innocent people into rascality, and you're going to help us."

"W'y, sut'ny, chile, I'll do all I kin to he'p you git dat rascal, but I don't know whaih he lives, case he's allus come hyeah to see me."

"He'll come back some day. In the meantime we will be laying for him."

Aunt Dicey was putting some very flaky biscuits into the oven, and perhaps the memory of other days made the young lawyer prolong his visit and his explanation. When, however, he left, it was with well–laid plans to catch Jason Buford napping.

It did not take long. Stealthily that same evening a tapping came at Aunt Dicey's door. She opened it, and a small, crouching figure crept in. It was Mr. Buford. He turned down the collar of his coat which he had had closely up about his face and said:

"Well, well, Sis' Callender, you sut'ny have spoiled us all."

"La, Brothah Buford, come in hyeah an' set down. Whaih you been?"

“I been hidin’ fu’ feah of that testimony you give in the court room. What did you do that fu’?”

“La, me, I didn’t know, you didn’t ‘splain to me in de fust.”

“Well, you see, you spoiled it, an’ I’ve got to git out of town as soon as I kin. Sis’ Callender, dese hyeah white people is mighty slippery, and they might catch me. But I want to beg you to go on away from hyeah so’s you won’t be hyeah to testify if dey does. Hyeah’s a hundred dollars of yo’ money right down, and you leave hyeah to–morrer mornin’ an’ go erway as far as you kin git.”

“La, man, I’s puffectly willin’ to he’p you, you know dat.”

“Cose, cose,” he answered hurriedly, “we col’red people has got to stan’ together.”

“But what about de res’ of dat money dat I been ‘vestin’ wid you?”

“I’m goin’ to pay intrus’ on that,” answered the promoter glibly.

“All right, all right.” Aunt Dicey had made several trips to the little back room just off her sitting room as she talked with the promoter. Three times in the window had she waved a lighted lamp. Three times without success. But at the last “all right,” she went into the room again. This time the waving lamp was answered by the sudden flash of a lantern outside.

“All right,” she said, as she returned to the room, “set down an’ lemme fix you some suppah.”

“I ain’t hardly got the time. I got to git away from hyeah.” But the smell of the new baked biscuits was in his nostrils and he could not resist the temptation to sit down. He was eating hastily, but with appreciation, when the door opened and two minions of the law entered.

Buford sprang up and turned to flee, but at the back door, her large form a towering and impassive barrier, stood Aunt Dicey.

“Oh, don’t hu’y, Brothah Buford,” she said calmly, “set down an’ he’p yo’se’f. Dese hyeah’s my friends.”

It was the next day that Robert Fairfax saw him in his cell. The man’s face was ashen with coward’s terror. He was like a caught rat though, bitingly on the defensive.

“You see we’ve got you, Buford,” said Fairfax coldly to him. “It is as well to confess.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ to say,” said Buford cautiously.

“You will have something to say later on unless you say it now. I don’t want to intimidate you, but Aunt Dicey’s word will be taken in any court in the United States against yours, and I see a few years hard labour for you between good stout walls.”

The little promoter showed his teeth in an impotent snarl. “What do you want me to do?” he asked, weakening.

“First, I want you to give back every cent of the money that you got out of Dicey Fairfax. Second, I want you to give up to every one of those Negroes that you have cheated every cent of the property you have accumulated by fraudulent means. Third, I want you to leave this place, and never come back so long as God leaves breath in your dirty body. If you do this, I will save you—you are not worth the saving—from the pen or worse. If you don’t, I will make this place so hot for you that hell will seem like an icebox beside it.”

The little yellow man was cowering in his cell before the attorney’s indignation. His lips were drawn back over his teeth in something that

was neither a snarl nor a smile. His eyes were bulging and fear–stricken, and his hands clasped and unclasped themselves nervously.

"I—I——" he faltered, "do you want to send me out without a cent?"

"Without a cent, without a cent," said Fairfax tensely.

"I won't do it," the rat in him again showed fight. "I won't do it. I'll stay hyeah an' fight you. You can't prove anything on me."

"All right, all right," and the attorney turned toward the door.

"Wait, wait," called the man, "I will do it, my God! I will do it. Jest let me out o' hyeah, don't keep me caged up. I'll go away from hyeah."

Fairfax turned back to him coldly, "You will keep your word?"

"Yes."

"I will return at once and take the confession."

And so the thing was done. Jason Buford, stripped of his ill–gotten gains, left the neighbourhood of Little Africa forever. And Aunt Dicey, no longer a wealthy woman and a capitalist, is baking golden brown biscuits for a certain young attorney and his wife, who has the bad habit of rousing her anger by references to her business name and her investments with a promoter.