



THE HEART OF HAPPY HOLLOW

by

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Chapter 10: The Wisdom of Silence

Jeremiah Anderson was free. He had been free for ten years, and he was proud of it. He had been proud of it from the beginning, and that was the reason that he was one of the first to cast off the bonds of his old relations, and move from the plantation and take up land for himself. He was anxious to cut himself off from all that bound him to his former life. So strong was this feeling in him that he would not consent to stay on and work for his one-time owner even for a full wage.

To the proposition of the planter and the gibes of some of his more dependent fellows he answered, “No, suh, I’s free, an’ I sholy is able to tek keer o’ myse’f. I done been fattenin’ frogs fu’ othah people’s snakes too long now.”

“But, Jerry,” said Samuel Brabant, “I don’t mean you any harm. The thing’s done. You don’t belong to me any more, but naturally, I take an interest in you, and want to do what I can to give you a start. It’s more than the Northern government has done for you, although such wise men ought to know that you have had no training in caring for yourselves.”

There was a slight sneer in the Southerner’s voice. Jerry perceived it and thought it directed against him. Instantly his pride rose and his neck stiffened.

“Nemmine me,” he answered, “nemmine me. I’s free, an’ w’en a man’s free, he’s free.”

“All right, go your own way. You may have to come back to me some time. If you have to come, come. I don’t blame you now. It must be a great thing to you, this dream—this nightmare.” Jerry looked at him. “Oh, it isn’t a nightmare now, but some day, maybe, it will be, then come to me.”

The master turned away from the newly made freeman, and Jerry went forth into the world which was henceforth to be his. He took with him his few belongings; these largely represented by his wife and four lusty—

eating children. Besides, he owned a little money, which he had got working for others when his master's task was done. Thus, bur'dened and equipped, he set out to tempt Fortune.

He might do one of two things—farm land upon shares for one of his short-handed neighbours, or buy a farm, mortgage it, and pay for it as he could. As was natural for Jerry, and not uncommendable, he chose at once the latter course, bargained for his twenty acres—for land was cheap then, bought his mule, built his cabin, and set up his household goods.

Now, slavery may give a man the habit of work, but it cannot imbue him with the natural thrift that long years of self-dependence brings. There were times when Jerry's freedom tugged too strongly at his easy inclination, drawing him away to idle when he should have toiled. What was the use of freedom, asked an inward voice, if one might not rest when one would? If he might not stop midway the furrow to listen and laugh at a droll story or tell one? If he might not go a-fishing when all the forces of nature invited and the jay-bird called from the tree and gave forth saucy banter like the fiery, blue shrew that she was?

There were times when his compunction held Jerry to his task, but more often he turned an end furrow and laid his misgivings snugly under it and was away to the woods or the creek. There was joy and a loaf for the present. What more could he ask?

The first year Fortune laughed at him, and her laugh is very different from her smile. She sent the swift rains to wash up the new planted seed, and the hungry birds to devour them. She sent the fierce sun to scorch the young crops, and the clinging weeds to hug the fresh greenness of his hope to death. She sent—cruellest jest of all—another baby to be fed, and so weakened Cindy Ann that for many days she could not work beside her husband in the fields.

Poverty began to teach the unlessoned delver in the soil the thrift which he needed; but he ended his first twelve months with barely enough to eat, and nothing paid on his land or his mule. Broken and discouraged, the words of his old master came to him. But he was proud with an obstinate pride and he shut his lips together so that he might not groan. He would not go to his master. Anything rather than that.

In that place sat certain beasts of prey, dealers, and lenders of money, who had their lairs somewhere within the boundaries of that wide and mysterious domain called The Law. They had their risks to run, but so must all beasts that eat flesh or drink blood. To them went Jerry, and they were kind to him. They gave him of their store. They gave him food and seed, but they were to own all that they gave him from what he raised, and they were to take their toll first from the new crops.

Now, the black had been warned against these same beasts, for others had fallen a prey to them even in so short a time as their emancipation measured, and they saw themselves the re-manacled slaves of a hopeless and ever-growing debt, but Jerry would not be warned. He chewed the warnings like husks between his teeth, and got no substance from them.

Then, Fortune, who deals in surprises, played him another trick. She smiled upon him. His second year was better than his first, and the brokers swore over his paid up note. Cindy Ann was strong again and the oldest boy was big enough to help with the work.

Samuel Brabant was displeased, not because he felt any malice toward his former servant, but for the reason that any man with the natural amount of human vanity must feel himself agrieved just as his cherished prophecy is about to come true. Isaiah himself could not have been above it. How much less, then, the uninspired Mr. Brabant, who had his "I told you so," all ready. He had been ready to help Jerry after giving him admonitions, but here it was not needed. An unused "I told you so," however kindly, is an acid that turns the milk of human kindness sour.

Jerry went on gaining in prosperity. The third year treated him better than the second, and the fourth better than the third. During the fifth he enlarged his farm and his house and took pride in the fact that his oldest boy, Matthew, was away at school. By the tenth year of his freedom he was arrogantly out of debt. Then his pride was too much for him. During all these years of his struggle the words of his master had been as gall in his mouth. Now he spat them out with a boast. He talked much in the market-place, and where many people gathered, he was much there, giving himself as a bright and shining example.

“Huh,” he would chuckle to any listeners he could find, “Ol’ Mas’ Brabant, he say, ‘Stay hyeah, stay hyeah, you do’ know how to tek keer o’ yo’se’f yit.’ But I des’ look at my two han’s an’ I say to myse’f, whut I been doin’ wid dese all dese yeahs—tekin’ keer o’ myse’f an’ him, too. I wo’k in de fiel’, he set in de big house an’ smoke. I wo’k in de fiel’, his son go away to college an’ come back a graduate. Das hit. Well, w’en freedom come, I des’ bent an’ boun’ I ain’ gwine do it no mo’ an’ I didn’t. Now look at me. I sets down w’en I wants to. I does my own wo’kin’ an’ my own smokin’. I don’t owe a cent, an’ dis yeah my boy gwine graduate f’om de school. Dat’s me, an’ I ain’ called on ol’ Mas’ yit.”

Now, an example is always an odious thing, because, first of all, it is always insolent even when it is bad, and there were those who listened to Jerry who had not been so successful as he, some even who had stayed on the plantation and as yet did not even own the mule they ploughed with. The hearts of those were filled with rage and their mouths with envy. Some of the sting of the latter got into their retelling of Jerry’s talk and made it worse than it was.

Old Samuel Brabant laughed and said, “Well, Jerry’s not dead yet, and although I don’t wish him any harm, my prophecy might come true yet.”

There were others who, hearing, did not laugh, or if they did, it was with a mere strained thinning of the lips that had no element of mirth in it. Temper and tolerance were short ten years after sixty-three.

The foolish farmer's boastings bore fruit, and one night when he and his family had gone to church he returned to find his house and barn in ashes, his mules burned and his crop ruined. It had been very quietly done and quickly. The glare against the sky had attracted few from the nearby town, and them too late to be of service.

Jerry camped that night across the road from what remained of his former dwelling. Cindy Ann and the children, worn out and worried, went to sleep in spite of themselves, but he sat there all night long, his chin between his knees, gazing at what had been his pride.

Well, the beasts lay in wait for him again, and when he came to them they showed their fangs in greeting. And the velvet was over their claws. He had escaped them before. He had impugned their skill in the hunt, and they were ravenous for him. Now he was fatter, too. He went away from them with hard terms, and a sickness at his heart. But he had not said "Yes" to the terms. He was going home to consider the almost hopeless conditions under which they would let him build again.

They were staying with a neighbour in town pending his negotiations and thither he went to ponder on his circumstances. Then it was that Cindy Ann came into the equation. She demanded to know what was to be done and how it was to be gone about.

"But Cindy Ann, honey, you do' know nuffin' 'bout bus'ness."

"T'ain't whut I knows, but whut I got a right to know," was her response.

"I do' see huccome you got any right to be a-pryin' into dese hyeah things."

“I’s got de same right I had to w’ok an’ struggle erlong an’ he’p you get whut we’s done los’.”

Jerry winced and ended by telling her all.

“Dat ain’t nuffin’ but owdacious robbery,” said Cindy Ann. “Dem people sees dat you got a little some’p’n, an’ dey ain’t gwine stop ontwell dey’s bu’nt an’ stoled evah blessed cent f’om you. Je’miah, don’t you have nuffin’ mo’ to do wid ‘em.”

“I got to, Cindy Ann.”

“Whut fu’ you got to?”

“How I gwine buil’ a cabin an’ a ba’n an’ buy a mule less’n I deal wid ‘em?”

“Dah’s Mas’ Sam Brabant. He’d he’p you out.”

Jerry rose up, his eyes flashing fire. “Cindy Ann,” he said, “you a fool, you ain’t got no mo’ pride den a guinea hen, an’ you got a heap less sense. W’y, befo’ I go to ol’ Mas’ Sam Brabant fu’ a cent, I’d sta’ve out in de road.”

“Huh!” said Cindy Ann, shutting her mouth on her impatience.

One gets tired of thinking and saying how much more sense a woman has than a man when she comes in where his sense stops and his pride begins.

With the recklessness of despair Jerry slept late that next morning, but he might have awakened early without spoiling his wife’s plans. She was up betimes, had gone on her mission and returned before her spouse awoke.

It was about ten o'clock when Brabant came to see him. Jerry grew sullen at once as his master approached, but his pride stiffened. This white man should see that misfortune could not weaken him.

“Well, Jerry,” said his former master, “you would not come to me, eh, so I must come to you. You let a little remark of mine keep you from your best friend, and put you in the way of losing the labour of years.”

Jerry made no answer.

“You’ve proved yourself able to work well, but Jerry,” pausing, “you haven’t yet shown that you’re able to take care of yourself, you don’t know how to keep your mouth shut.”

The ex-slave tried to prove this a lie by negative pantomime.

“I’m going to lend you the money to start again.”

“I won’t— —”

“Yes, you will, if you don’t, I’ll lend it to Cindy Ann, and let her build in her own name. She’s got more sense than you, and she knows how to keep still when things go well.”

“Mas’ Sam,” cried Jerry, rising quickly, “don’ len’ dat money to Cindy Ann. W’y ef a ooman’s got anything she nevah lets you hyeah de las’ of it.”

“Will you take it, then?”

“Yes, suh; yes, suh, an’ thank ‘e, Mas’ Sam.” There were sobs some place back in his throat. “An’ nex’ time ef I evah gets a sta’t agin, I’ll keep my mouf shet. Fac’ is, I’ll come to you, Mas’ Sam, an’ borry fu’ de sake o’ hidin’.”