The Heart of Happy Hollow

by

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Chapter 13: Schwalliger's Philanthropy

There is no adequate reason why Schwalliger's name should appear upon the pages of history. He was decidedly not in good society. He was not even respectable as respectability goes. But certain men liked him and certain women loved him. He is dead. That is all that will be said of the most of us after a while. He was but a weak member of the community, but those who loved him did not condemn him, and they shut their eyes to his shortcomings because they were a part of him. Without his follies he would not have been himself.

Schwalliger was only a race–horse "tout." Ah, don't hold up your hands, good friends, for circumstances of birth make most of us what we are, whether poets or pickpockets, and if this thick–set, bow–legged black man became a "tout" it was because he had to. Old horsemen will tell you that Schwalliger—no one knew where he got the name—was rolling and tumbling about the track at Bennings when he was still so short in stature that he got the name of the "tadpole." Naturally, he came to know much of horses, grew up with them, in fact, and having no wealthy father or mother to indulge him in his taste or help him use his knowledge, he did the next best thing and used his special education for himself in the humble capacity of voluntary adviser to aspiring gamesters. He prospered and blossomed out into good clothes of a highly ornate pattern. Naturally, like a man in any other business, he had his ups and downs, and there were times when the good clothes disappeared and he was temporarily forced to return to the occupation of rubbing down horses; but these periods of depression were of short duration, and at the next turn of fortune's wheel he would again be on top.

"No, thuh," he was wont to say, with his inimitable lisp—"no, thuh, you can't keep a good man down. 'Tain't no use a–talkin', you jeth can't. It don't do me no harm to go back to rubbin' now an' then. It jeth nachully keepth me on good termth with de hothes."

And, indeed, it did seem that his prophecies were surer and his knowledge more direct after one of these periods of enforced humility.

There were various things whispered about Schwalliger; that he was no more honest than he should be, that he was not as sound as he might be; but though it might be claimed, and was, that he would prophesy, on occasion, the success of three different horses to three different men, no one ever accused him of being less than fair with the women who came out from the city to enjoy the races and increase their excitement by staking small sums. To these Schwalliger was the soul of courtesy and honour, and if they lost upon his advice, he was not happy until he had made it up to them again.

One, however, who sets himself to work to give a race–horse tout a character may expect to have his labour for his pains. The profession of his subject is against him. He may as well put aside his energy and say, "Well, perhaps he was a bad lot, but— —." The present story is not destined to put you more in love with the hero of it, but— —

The heat and enthusiasm at Saratoga and the other race–courses was done, and autumn and the glory of Bennings had come. The ingratiating Schwalliger came back with the horses to his old stamping ground and to happiness. The other tracks had not treated him kindly, and but for the kindness of his equine friends, whom he slept with and tended, he might have come back to Washington on the wooden steps. But he was back, and that was happiness for him. Broke?

"Well," said Schwalliger, in answer to a trainer's question, "I ain't exactly broke, Misthah Johnthon, but I wath pretty badly bent. I goth awa jutht ath thoon ath I commenth to feel mythelf crackin', but I'm hyeah to git even."

He was only a rubber again, but he began to get even early in the week, and by Saturday he was again as like to a rainbow as any of his class. He

did not, however, throw away his rubber's clothes. He was used to the caprices of fortune, and he did not know how soon again he should need them. That he was not dressed in them, and yet saved them, made him capable of performing his one philanthropy.

Had he not been gorgeously dressed he would not have inspired the confidence of the old Negro who came up to him on Tuesday morning, disconsolate and weeping.

"Mistah," he said deferentially through his tears, "is you a spo't?"

Mr. Schwalliger's chest protruded, and his very red lips opened in a smile as he answered: "Well, I do' know'th I'm tho much of a thpo't, but I think I knowth a thing or two."

"You look lak a spo'tin' gent'man, an' ef you is I thought mebbe you'd he'p me out."

"Wha'th the mattah? Up aintht it? You look a little ol' to be doin' the gay an' frithky." But Schwalliger's eyes were kind.

"Well, I'll tell you des' how it is, suh. I come f'om down in Ma'lan', 'case I wanted to see de hosses run. My ol' mastah was moughty fon' of sich spo't, an' I kin' o' likes it myse'f, dough I don't nevah bet, suh. I's a chu'ch membah. But yistiddy aftahnoon dee was two gent'men what I seen playin' wid a leetle ball an' some cups ovah it, an' I went up to look on, an' lo an' behol', suh, it was one o' dese money–mekin' t'ings. W'y, I seen de man des' stan' dere an' mek money by the fis'ful. Well, I 'low I got sorter wo'ked up. De men dee axed me to bet, but I 'low how I was a chu'ch membah an' didn't tek pa't in no sich carryin's on, an' den dee said 'twan't nuffin mo' den des' a chu'ch raffle, an' it was mo' fun den anyt'ing else. I des' say dat I could fin' de little ball, an' dee said I couldn't, an' if I fin' it dee gin me twenty dollahs, an' if I didn' I des' gin 'em ten dollahs. I shuk my haid. I wa'n't gwine be tempted, an' I try to pull myse'f erway. Ef I'd 'a' gone den 'twould 'a' been all right, but I

stayed an' I stayed, an' I looked, an' I looked, an' it did seem lak it was so easy. At las', mistah, I tried it, an' I didn' fin' dat ball, an' dee got my ten dollahs, an' dat was all I had."

"Uh, huh," said Schwalliger grimly, "thell game, an' dey did you." The old man shuffled uneasily, but continued:

"Yes, suh, dee done me, an' de worst of it is, I's 'fraid to go home, even ef I could get dere, 'case dee boun' to axe me how I los' dat money, an' dee ain't no way fu' me to hide it, an' ef dee fin' out I been gamblin' I'll git chu'ched fu' it, an' I been a puffessor so long——" The old man's voice broke, and Schwalliger smiled the crooked smile of a man whose heart is touched.

"Whereth thith push wo'kin'?" he said briefly.

"Right ovah thaih," said the old Negro, indicating a part of the grounds not far distant.

"All right, you go on ovah thaih an' wait fu' me; an' if you thee me, remembah, you don't thee me. I don't know you, you don't know me, but I'll try to thee you out all right."

The old man went on his way, a new light in his eyes at the hope Schwalliger had inspired. Schwalliger himself made his way back to the stables; his dirty, horsy, rubber's outfit was there. He smiled intelligently as he looked at it. He was smiling in a different manner when, all dressed in it, he came up nearer to the grand stand. It was a very inane smile. He looked the very image of simplicity and ignorance, like a man who was anxious and ready to be duped. He strolled carelessly up to where the little game with the little ball was going on, and stood there looking foolishly on. The three young men—ostensibly there was only one—were doing a rushing business. They were playing very successfully on that trait of human nature which feels itself glorified and exalted when it has got something for nothing. The rustics, black and

white, and some who had not the excuse of rusticity, were falling readily into the trap and losing their hard–earned money. Every now and then a man—one of their confederates, of course, would make a striking winning, and this served as a bait for the rest of the spectators. Schwalliger looked on with growing interest, always smiling an ignorant, simple smile. Finally, as if he could stand it no longer, he ran his hand in his pocket and pulled out a roll of money—money in its most beautiful and tempting form, the long, green notes. Then, as if a sudden spirit of prudence had taken possession of him, he put it back into his pocket, shook his head, and began working his way out of the crowd. But the operator of the shell game had caught sight of the bills, and it was like the scent of blood to the tiger. His eye was on the simple Negro at once, and he called cheerfully:

"Come up, uncle, and try your luck. See how I manipulate this ball. Easy enough to find if you're only lucky." He was so flippantly shrewd that his newness to the business was insolently apparent to Schwalliger, who knew a thing or two himself. Schwalliger smiled again and shook his head.

"Oh, no, thuh," he said, "I don't play dat."

"Why, come and try your luck anyhow; no harm in it."

Schwalliger took out his money and looked at it again and shook his head. He began again his backward movement from the crowd.

"No," he said, "I wouldn' play erroun' hyeah befo' all thethe people, becauthe you wouldn't pay me even ef I won."

"Why, of course we would," said the flippant operator; "everybody looks alike to us here."

Schwalliger kept moving away, ever and anon sending wistful, inane glances back at his tempter.

The bait worked admirably. The man closed up his little folding table, and, winking to his confederates, followed the retreating Negro. They stayed about with the crowd, while he followed on and on until Schwalliger had led him into a short alley between the stables. There he paused and allowed his pursuer to catch up with him.

"Thay, mithtah," he said, "what you keep on follerin' me fu'? I do' want to play wid you; I ain't got but fo'ty dollahs, an' ef I lothe I'll have to walk home."

"Why, my dear fellow, there ain't no way for you to lose. Come, now, let me show you." And he set the table down and began to manipulate the ball dexterously. "Needn't put no money down. Just see if you can locate the ball a few times for fun."

Schwalliger consented, and, greatly to his delight, located the little ball four times out of five. He was grinning now and the eye of the tempter was gleaming. Schwalliger took out his money.

"How much you got?" he said.

"Just eighty–five dollars, and I will lay it all against your forty."

"What you got it in?" asked Schwalliger.

"Four fives, four tens, and five five–dollar gold–pieces." And the man displayed it ostentatiously. The tout's eyes flashed as he saw his opponent put his money back into his waistcoat pocket.

"Well, I bet you," he said, and planked his money down.

The operator took the shells and swept the pea first under one then under the other, and laid the three side by side. Schwalliger laid his hand upon one. He lifted it up and there was nothing there.

"Ha, ha, you've had bad luck," said the operator—"you lose, you lose. Well, I'm sorry for you, old fellow, but we all take chances in this little game, you know." He was folding up his table when all of a sudden a cry arose to heaven from Schwalliger's lips, and he grappled with the very shrewd young man, while shriek on shriek of "Murder! Robber! Police!" came from his lips. The police at Bennings were not slow to answer a call like this, and they came running up, and Schwalliger, who, among other things, was something of an actor, told his story trembling, incoherently, while the operator looked on aghast. Schwalliger demanded protection. He had been robbed. He had bet his eighty–five dollars against the operator's forty, and when he had accidentally picked out the right shell the operator had grabbed his money and attempted to escape. He wanted his money. He had eighty–five dollars, he said. "He had fo' fiveth, fo' tenth, and five five–dollar gold–pieceth, an' he wanted them."

The policeman was thorough. He made his search at once. It was even as Schwalliger had said. The money was on the gambler even as the Negro had said. Well, there was nothing but justice to be done. The officers returned the eighty–five dollars to Schwalliger, and out of an unusual access of clemency bade the operator begone or they would run him in.

When he had gone, Schwalliger turned and winked slowly at the minions of the law, and went quietly into a corner with them, and there was the sound of the shuffling of silken paper. Later on he found the old man and returned him his ten, and went back to don his Jacob's coat.

Who shall say that Schwalliger was not a true philanthropist?