

MONEY TO BURN - 013

Cynthia suddenly broke off her conversation. “Slip slop, slip-slop” went the old shoes on her feet, as she hurried home to prepare her husband’s breakfast. What a fool she had been to stand up there talking to Mavis who had no man to cook for; now nine had long gone, and Most Man would soon be home like a hungry lion. Bitter experience had taught her that Most Man was apt to be violent when his meals were not punctual.

As she turned into her gate, surprise unbarred her lips and they dropped apart displaying two gleaming gold teeth. She halted and watched her man approach. Even from a distance she could see something unusual in his manner. He rode the carrier-cycle like one demented. His ebony face was gleaming with sweat and excitement, and he ignored a box of macaroni that bobbed out of the carrier. A maniacal smile split his face, and he blasphemed repeatedly in deep jubilant chuckles. Reaching his home, he hurled the laden machine against the house, and whipped a newspaper from his back pocket, cuffed the amazed Cynthia playfully in the stomach as he tore past her.

“Cinty, Cinty, guess wha happen,” he panted, as he threw himself into a three cornered chair and opened the paper with big, trembling hands. “De onliest thing I kin see happen is dat, yuh like yuh gine mad. Wuh yuh cuff muh in muh stomach fuh, yuh damn fool?” But, despite this

retort, Cynthia was itchy with curiosity. As Most Man produced and carefully unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket, matching it beside some figures in the newspaper, she edged closer, hoping to solve the riddle, and caught a glimpse of the Turf Club ticket.

‘Wa happen, Joe, yuh win sumting?’ she cried, and throwing all reserve away she snatched paper and ticket from his hands.

“If uh win, Cinty! If uh win! Dah is uh queshun, or yuh blind? Six thousand dollars to de holduh uh O-4470, and I is dat holduh. Oh God, Cinty, we gine lick cork!” He jumped up, and snatching hold of Cynthia, together they did a wild rhumba on the treacherous floor.

To Most Man the day was one long, happy dream. As he pedalled the bicycle and sub-consciously delivered his parcels, he saw himself petted and sought after by all those smooth-skinned, full-bosomed wenches who before had tossed their heads with disdain and arrogance when he peered into their faces. He saw himself bedecked in all that finery which those Broad Street merchants exhibited to his hungry eyes—brown, no, grey Wilson, a suit of that striped grey tweed he had coveted at ten dollars a yard—tie to match—two toned shoes. But most lovingly did he dwell on a picture which he conjured up of strutting in a huge shop, filled with glaring lights, rum, goods, hustling girls and noisy customers. Yes, he had always wanted a shop. A shop where he could bawl and shout orders. A shop which was his very own, and which would make him richer than the gods. As he tore around a

corner, he missed a heavy Army truck by inches. The big, red driver glared after him, and swore deep in his hairy chest as he released the brakes.

As for Cinty, she lived in a realm of snappy hats, gorgeous dresses, giddy high heeled shoes and perpetual dancing. As she moved about her daily tasks, she repeatedly struck attitudes before a scarred mirror and exclaimed through folded lips, “Uh gwine set dum mad.”

But wealth is truly the root of all evil. On the following day Most Man was a full half hour late to his work. This did not improve the temper of his employer, who as it happened, was already in a nasty one. One of his most cherished customers had first phoned, saying she had not received what she had ordered on the previous day and had threatened to withhold her patronage. He therefore fixed on Most Man as a means of venting his disgust. “Listen you”, he bawled, “what I payin’ you for? To walk in here whenever you d-d well like, and to do whatever you like with my orders? Where Miss Robinson goods that you carry from here yesterday? Answer me, man; you black, ugly—” the telephone rang, and he arrested his flow of speech as he grabbed it to his ear.

Indignation filled Most Man’s bosom. Who was this man that he should so address him? He, whose wealth had to be written in a long line of wearying figures. He, Joe Grimes, sole possessor of six thousand dollars! Six thousand, seven hundred and eighty five dollars! Why, he

could buy out everything in that dirty store along with the skinny backra who dared bawl at him. It almost rendered him speechless, and he stood silent and rooted where he was. Then slowly a pitying grin exposed his strong orders. Poor man; he couldn't guess how different it all was with Joe Grimes.

At last his boss flung down the instrument, and turned on Most Man once more. He eyed him savagely for a long moment. Was the man losing his senses to stand there with white eyes glaring at him? He strode up to his employee and bawled in his face words which were questionable in their origin, and which would have shocked many who took Holy Communion with him on Sundays. Most Man, despite his many deficiencies, was not entirely lacking in common-sense. He realized he could do no good there. It was true that he pipped commendably at times, but he was not inclined to enter into verbal competition with Mr. Harris on his premises. Further more, speech seemed to be denied him. But, he had to say something. He would not slink out like a whipped pup. He would show them all that he was independent. He searched his vitals for his voice, and thinking he had found it at last, nerved himself to deliver his verbal coup-de-grace. Jerking his head forward he spluttered in a strangely weak voice, "Mr. Harris, go tuh-tuh—France." Then, turning on his heel, he bow-legged towards the streets.

His employer watched his retreating figure as a maimed, hungry lion might watch a fat deer pass under its nose.

As Most Man turned up the street, he cursed himself for having been so childish. A thousand suitable names that he should have called Mr. Harris now came to him too late.

Gradually the truth seeped through the turmoil of his brain. His wealth, however fabulous, was still in the future, and he was in urgent need of hard, solid cash. He must do something and quickly. Wasn't there one of his friends who could lend him a spot of cash until he came into his own? Tumper—Charlie—Profeseor—Barry—Crab—Boysie--one by one he considered and cancelled them. They gladly would, he reasoned, but they themselves were as poor as church rats. There were some big white people who lent money, he had heard, but common sense told him that they would require some security, and he had decided that no power in earth or Hell, not even in Heaven, would persuade him to part with the only security which he could offer—the Turf Club ticket—until he exchanged it for his wealth. What was he to do? To-morrow was Sunday, and he must have money. There was rent to be paid, food to be bought milk to be paid for, a hundred things which needed money. Were he and Cinty to go hungry when seven thousand dollars lay neatly folded in his pocket? Was he to eat stewed potatoes and roasted—and then he remembered Muriel. It was true that they were not such great friends, but she might still serve the purpose. She certainly did a fair trade in her snowball and fried fish

shop and only last night Tumper was telling him that she had a tidy piece tucked away. Now that he had decided on his line of action. Most Man was eager to get to grips. He fumbled in his pockets and collected his last actual wealth—three black copper cents. Signalling a passing bus, he hopped it as it slackened speed.

The shop was almost empty when he entered. Muriel eyed him suspiciously when he leered and said, “Mornin’ Miss Gibbs, wan to see yuh’ bout some bisness.”

Muriel by habit knew that Most Man never settled his accounts with her so early on Saturday mornings, and there was neither greeting nor encouragement in her voice when she replied, ‘Wuh you want wid me now, Most Man? Yuh cum to pay muh de thirty cents dat yuh eat out or wuh? Doan ask muh nuh foolishness ‘bout trussing yud wid nutting, cause tuhday is a bright Sarduh an uh wan’ money.’”

“Lookuh Muriel, behave yuhself; uh got sumting great to tell yuh.” He looked around cautiously to make sure the little customer had gone, then bending over the counter, he whispered in her ear, ‘Uh haul de pieces at de races Muriel, look!’” So saying, he flourished ticket and paper before Muriel’s now brightened gaze.

“Lordee! Most Man, an’ yuh now tell muh? Wuh yuh en treat muh like a frien’ at all. Leh we burse a bottle right now an’ celebrate; dis ting doan happen every day.

Miss Gibbs' former unpleasantness was all gone. Already her imagination was feeding and planning in rich, futile pastures conjured up by a woman's greed. Her usually sour face beamed as she poured some beverage into two glasses, and she ignored a small boy's pleadings for a penny in ice, two fish-cakes, and a penny back.

They drank, and grimaced at each other for a long moment.

"Gih de little boy wuh he want, Muriel, an' den uh wan' to ask yuh a favur."

"Hey! anyting dat I kin do fuh yuh, Boy Chile, yuh kin considuh dun," Muriel replied, as she picked at the chunk of ice.

"Well, dis is how uh stan', Moo-Moo," Most Man continued when the little boy had gone. "Uh had tuh leave muh work dis mornin' widout gettin' pay, cause I an Mr. Harris can't set horses good, an' uh doan wan to bring muhself in trouble. So uh wan' some ready cash to spen', an' uh wan' to know if yuh kin help muh till next week wen duh pay out de prizes."

The grasping instinct In Muriel's nature revoked at this proposal and her face clouded for a brief moment. But cunning and greed predominated, and she knew she stood to gain heavily if she but played the game with a little skill. She therefore smiled again as she gushed, "Dah is all, Most Man? Wuh I taut yuh did want sumting. Tell muh how much yuh want, an' once I got it, it is yours."

Most Man caressed his rough, hairy chin, and reached at some cobweb in the dirty roof. He wondered how much she could manage. He had decided that gone forever were his days of stinting and poverty. He had already given Cynthia orders to look for a big, decent house in a decent neighbourhood until he built his own mansion. He would like to celebrate his good fortune with his buddies—Crab, Tumpa, Barry, etc, on the following Sunday, and that would call for big pieces.

“Well, to tell de trute, Muriel,” he at last replied, “uh wan’ to do some celebrating tomaurah, besides an uh got uh lot uh debt on muh shoulders dat uh wan’ to get rid uh. If yuh got uh hundred dollars lay aside dat yuh en using jus’ now yuh wun lose by lenin’ me.”

Muriel could not suppress a gasp. A hundred dollars! She had thought only in terms of units and a possible ten when she had spoken, but here was asking a big hundred dollars. A hundred dollars! She had her life’s savings which was one dollar and fifteen cents more than this on Symmond’s bank, but she began to shake her head slowly from side to side.

But greed is a great *motivator*. What, after all, was a hundred dollars beside six thousand? she reflected. It would all come right, and she might get fifty, possibly another hundred on her loan.

“Leh muh see”, she pondered. “All rite, Most Man; only because it is you. But uh gine got to leave Rita in de shop wen she come, an’ go tuh town and draw it for yuh. Yuh kin get it as I come back. Yuh want me to keep de ticket fuh yuh dat yuh shun los’ it’?”

Most Man wasn't parting with that ticket. "Dat is all right, Muriel," he replied. "Yuh kin bet yuh life. I in gine los' this. Uh gine up de road an' tell Barry an' de res' uh boys 'bout de celebrashun tomaurah. An' you got to be day too, Muriel, an' doan tink I gihing yuh all dis trouble fuh nutting. I doan fuhget people dat help me."

Muriel was a trifle annoyed at his refusal, but she concealed this. "All rite, Luky Boy; yuh kin call back 'bout rung twelve uh 'clock."

"O.K. Sweets," Most Man replied, and set out to summon his guests for the morrow's rejoicing.

At about half past twelve he was back and Muriel counted out some bank notes to him. "Yuh kin jus' gih muh uh receipt fuh so," she said. Not dat uh in trus' yuh, Most Man, but, yuh know, bisniss is bisniss." She produced a stub of pencil and a notebook. Most Man, a little breathless at handling so much money, wrote long and painfully to fill two lines with big, ungainly letters, then laboured his name below.

"Well, see yuh tuhmaurah, Muriel," he said, as he prepared to go, "we pullin' out at nine, doan fuhget."

He crinkled the crisp notes in his pocket as he whistled down the street. Arrangements for the next day's spree had to be made, and he turned the ideas over in his mind as he walked. Two cars, eats, drinks—all had to be seen about.

When he reached home, he took the ticket, and placed it in his Sunday trousers' pocket for safety.

Sunday was indeed a spree. Tumpa, Barry, Charlie, Boysie, Crab, their girl friends, Muriel, all toured the countryside, ate, drank, and were merry to their hearts' content and more. Seven o'clock that night found them noisy, drunk, tired, sleepy, firing the last ones at Most Man's packed home.

Barry Coombes had just hiccougged a speech, and the glasses were raised. The merry-makers drank, rolling their heavy, blood infected eyes. Most Man produced his pipe and lurched across to where the sooty oil lamp smoked away on a low bracket in a corner. His bleary eyes moved slowly about the room in search of something to ignite the tobacco. Rocking on his fast failing legs, he fumbled in his pockets where his came into contact with what he wanted--a scrap of paper. He withdrew it, and his eyes half closed and head nodding, he screwed and pushed it into the flame. When half and more had been destroyed he held the flaming portion over the pipe's bowl, trying to light it, with unruly, trembling hands. The paper burned on until it singed his fingers. With a muttered oath he dropped it upon the floor and watched the flame subside before crushing the fragment with his foot. Then, his senses cleared by the sharp burn, an awful tear assailed him. He stopped, and picking up the small end of paper, carried it nearer to the

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light. As he unscrewed it, a deeper horror stamped his features, while a sob like that of a child shook his huge frame. With mad force he hurled the lamp to smash into a thousand pieces, while his sickening blasphemy filled the blackness of the confused room. Tightly clenched in his left hand was the fire-scolloped remnant of his Turf Club ticket.

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