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OBADIAH PAYS UP

THE STORY OF A STINGY MAN

He Talked Money and Interest in His Sleep and
One Day He Waked Up.

By GEORGE MURRAY GILBERT

"We don't need no tapestry for that wall," croaked Obadiah to his wife, "and I ain't going to pay for it no-how!" He leaned back in his chair, swung his feet up to the mantel-piece and hooked his heels on the edge of it.

"Now, Obadiah Watkins," began Lucy, dropping her sewing to her lap and looking over her spectacles at him. "The tapestry was given to the church bazaar and auctioned off. I was the highest bidder and got it! Now—"

"Them dad-blamed womens knowed how to bid it up 'cause they knows I'm rich!" cut in Obadiah angrily. "And I ain't going to give no seventy dollar check to pay for it!" He lighted a cigar, flipped the match into the grate fire and tilted back in his chair.

"I'm worried a heap about you, Obadiah," Lucy sighed as she took off her spectacles and gazed into his face.

"Uh, woman, what's you got to worry about me—go-long!" he grunted sarcastically.

"Heaps to worry about! All you talks is money! Talks money at your meals, breakfast, dinner and supper! Talks money and bonds, and interest in your sleep! Love for money has done put wrinkles in your face and heart, and done shrunk your conscience till it ain't no bigger than that quatah cigar you's got stuck between your store-teeth—you heard me, man!"

"Course I wants money, woman!" Obadiah exclaimed, "I wants all I can tote—"

"The more you totes," broke in Lucy, her eyes rounded, "the more stinginess you totes with it! Cogitate that, man!"

"Stinginess!" blurted Obadiah, scratching his bald head. "Woman, ain't you got fine clothes? Ain't you got the best radio, sewing machine—ain't you got a big Bible with real gold edges? Stingy? Ain't I done fixed up this here living room with new furniture and thick rug? Lucy Watkins, you's done got a heap more than most white womens—stingy!"

"You're sure good to me, man—uh-huh! I'm as fat and sleek as a petted house tabby! Uh-huh, man! But Obadiah, I ain't got no real happiness in my heaviness! I'm sorry for the poor that Old Man Depression is griping and squeezing all the hope from their hearts!"

"What's us got to do with it? Ain't you proud, woman, to hear folks say I'm rich and successful? When us was thirty, didn't have a thin dime! In twenty-five years, I done raise myself from a bricklayer to one of the big builders in this here New Orleans town! Go-long woman, with your moaning!"

"But folkses says you's stingy, Obadiah. I knows you knows, the church chunney needs rebuilding. The furnace done smoke so that the congregations all weeps smoky tears." She sighed. "Last Sunday, some old meany, done flipped a lead dollar into the contribution plate—Uh-huh! Just 'bout as good as that pusson's fake piety!"

"Don't lude, woman? Weren't me!" snapped Obadiah.

She sighed, glanced at him, smoothed her apron and smiled and said, "Obadiah, can't us get the furnace and church chimney fixed?"

She gasped, leaned and put her hand on his shoulder: "Lorsy, man," she said, "Don't lean so far back in that chair? If the legs should break, you'd smack your head against the floor and break my new chair, too!"

"I ain't doing no work in the church and wait for my money, Mrs. Lucy Watkins! It's slow pay and—"

"Stop leaning so far back—" she warned again, "And you's scratching the varnish off the mantel with you

big feet—LOOK OUT!" He heard the legs of the chair cracking—leaned forward and kicked his legs and recovered his balance.

"What's the idea smacking my head like that?" he growled, as he turned—Lucy's chair was vacant, but rocking violently, as if she had left it in a hurry.

"Obadiah Watkins, I done smacked you good!" laughed a sharp voice, no louder than the squeaking of a mouse.

He swung his feet from the mantel-piece, turned in his chair and glanced around the room.

"I'm right here?" piped the squeaky voice. "Can't you see me?"

Obadiah bent forward in his chair and his eyes rounded with amazement as he stared at a tiny man, no taller than one of Obadiah's cigars, and the same color. He was standing with feet far apart, trying to keep his balance on the arm of the rocking chair. His suit was a gray tweed, exactly like Obadiah's suit. His hat, shoes, gray gaiters, and even his tiny ivory-headed cane, no bigger than a fine cambric needle, matched Obadiah's. It was as if he were looking through the large end of a telescope at himself—shrunk a thousand times, until he was about four inches tall.

Obadiah Watkins took his cigar from his mouth, glanced at the tiny one, roared with laughter and then said,

"Funny-looking, I ain't never seen nothing so small—naw-suh!"

"Shut you face?" commanded the tiny one, brandishing his cane. "It's your dad-blamed neglect that's made me small! Huh, some folks in this ole New Orleans town, done reckons you's smaller than me!"

"Ha, ha," giggled Obadiah, slapping his legs. "I's got to laugh!" and he did. "Please excuse me, funny little man and—"

"That's your ignorance—laughs at what you don't understand!"

"Who is you, peewee?"

"The best part of you—skinfint! Some men totes me smaller than I is now! Sometimes I totes men and controls them—they's darn few! I ain't a-feared of no man—I ain't! I has done made kings, tyrants, swell-headed politicians, murderers, and even a few lawyers, listen to me and go to church the next day. If more men would listen to my wee voice—and don't reckon I'm just alluding to democrats, republicans and prohibitionists—'cause I ain't—why then the world would be better! Obadiah Watkins, I'm Conscience!"

Obadiah's eyes dilated, his mouth opened and he rubbed the back of his head and whispered, "Conscience, you's sure small; but you totes an awful wallop! My head hurts where you done smacked me one!" He straightened and bowed, "Now go-long, you funny-looking, and don't pester me? I ain't done nothing—I ain't!"

"I knows you ain't!" sneered Conscience, "and that's why I'm with you! Look at that tapestry on the wall," he pointed to it with his cane. "What's seventy smackers to a rich old geezer like you is! You refused to pay for it! A pastoral, too! Ain't I right?"

"Well, I reckons you's right, Conscience," admitted Obadiah.

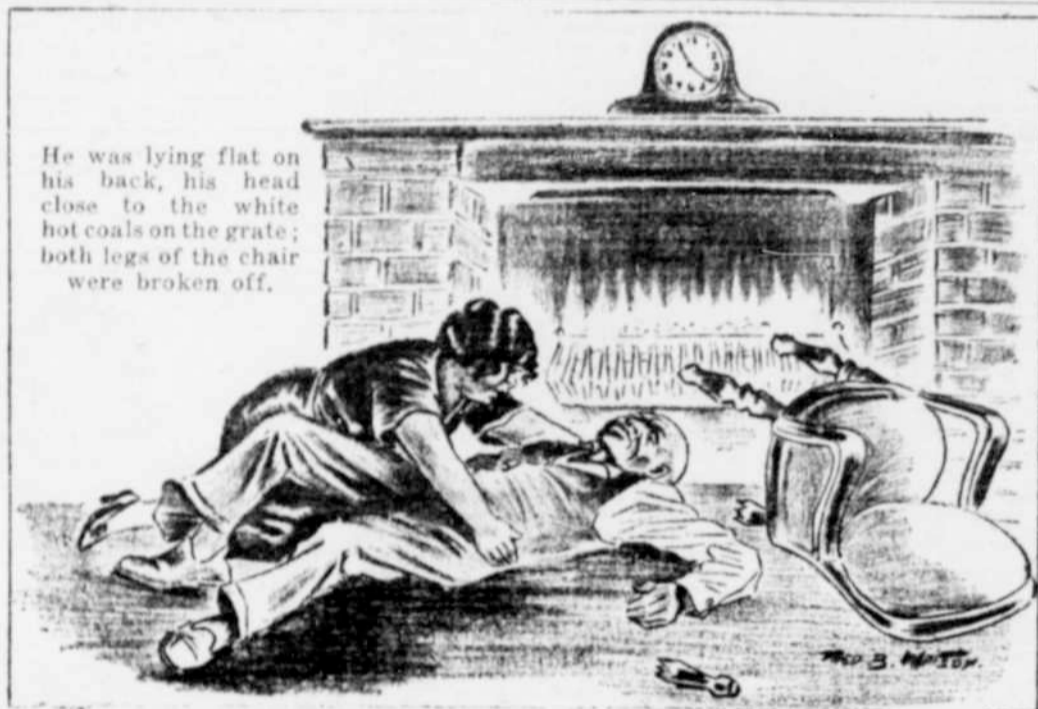
"Watch it now?" whispered Conscience.

Obadiah saw the tapestry, on the wall between the windows, draw aside into folds until it was hanging in one large fold. He gasped in astonishment—he was staring into the ward of a hospital, and at a big man in a bed, his strong face twisted with pain, his thin fingers picking at the counterpane.

"That's the wreck of what was Big Joe Rance, one of your best ornamental plasterers," sobbed Conscience.

"I didn't shove him off the scaffold!" whimpered Obadiah.

He was lying flat on his back, his head close to the white hot coals on the grate; both legs of the chair were broken off.



"Shut up!" snapped in Conscience, stabbing Obadiah behind the ear with the little cane. "You didn't shove him off—Oh, no! You old chilled-stealed money grabber! But you slipped that grafting scaffold inspector fifty dollars to pass that faulty scaffold, with the platform boards a foot apart. Down Joe went, sixty feet. He's passed through the circles of hell! His wife and kiddies in want! You should pay him full time from the day he fell until he's well!" He jabbed Obadiah with the cane. He winced.

"Look again, skinfint," Conscience ordered. Obadiah turned and stared at the old frame church, he knew so well. The tall chimney was out of plumb and the bricks loose. He lowered his eyes to the basement doors. The tapestry moved back and shut out the vision.

"Obadiah Watkins," began the stinging voice of Conscience, "a month ago, you promised the pastor to fix that chimney and the furnace. Promised at the same time, you would send one of your carpenters to fix those doors! You know that the building inspector, told the pastor that the doors must open outward! That the door between the stairway of the sacrisy and basement, must be a swinging door—they are fire-traps!"

"I was very busy—"

"Ohmigosh wat a whopper!" squeaked Conscience. "If you tole that to a mule, he'd kick your brains out! You can't wrestle with me and truth, ljos! You was waiting for the church to git some money to pay you!"

"Conscience, I'm sure sorry!"

"Let your Conscience show you this, Obadiah Watkins!"

The tapestry folded back. Obadiah leaned forward and stared into the basement of the church. He always liked the pretty girls of the church. Now the basement was crowded with them. All shapes, sizes and colors, from pure black to chinkapin-brown. Many of the girls had flat baskets, filled with cakes, candies and toys. Several had grab-bags. He could hear their trilling laughter as they peddled their dainties.

"He, he," chuckled Obadiah, "it am the church bazaar! There's my Lucy in the tent. She's telling the fortunes of the boys and girls. Everybody loves Lucy—she loves everybody!"

"You're a miser with your love and with your money!" accused Conscience. "It's mighty long time since you done put your arm around her, pressed your cheek against hers and called her your dear old sweetheart—you love dodger!"

"But us done been married thirty

years! That's so foolish—"

"Shut your old head?" roared Conscience. "All wives likes their husbands to pet them—what's thirty years to love!"

"She's always been been a mighty fine gal to me! Gosh, if I lost her!"

"Look again?" Conscience tempted.

Obadiah turned again and saw Pastor Roberts in the happy crowd. He was patting the heads of the kiddies around him. He raised his hand and said,

"I'm so pleased to tell you-all, that we now have two hundred dollars for the poor, and that's not including the seventy dollars for the tapestry, our beloved sister, Mrs. Lucy Watkins bought."

"Two hundred dollars am pretty good!" exclaimed Obadiah.

"Go-long, you old money-hugger!" sneered Conscience. "You could give two thousand and never miss it! Look there again?"

Obadiah heard a noise like distant thunder, and then he saw the basement begin to fill with heavy, yellow smoke.

"The wind blew down the chimney," Conscience sobbed, "and the brick filled up the furnace flue. Now it's vomiting out gas and thick smoke into the basement! Look!"

The frightened women and children were pushing and crowding against the big doors—even the young men were frightened and excited. The pastor was trying to pull the women from the doors—they fought him, screaming with terror. Lucy, a baby in her arms, staggered toward the crowd. She fell to her knees, glanced at the baby in her arms, snatched up a folded newspaper from the floor and fanned the smoke from its face. She gasped and collapsed to the floor.

"They're trapped!" whimpered Obadiah!

"Your neglect set the trap," accused Conscience.

"Lucy! My... Lucy!" sobbed Obadiah, trying to rise from the chair.

"Honey-boy, is you all right?" cooed Lucy's soft voice, close to his ear. "You've been squirming like a speared eel!"

He opened his eyes and looked up into hers—he was lying flat on his back, his head close to the white hot coals in the grate. He glanced at the chair near him—both rear legs were broken off. He got on his feet, rubbed the back of his head and gazed into Lucy's smiling eyes.

"Done tole you not to lean back in that chair?" she admonished, smiling. "It bruk and smacked that turnip you calls a head, against the tiles of

the hearth. Hope it knocked out some of the fool!"

He threw his arms around her and kissed her a dozen times. She laughed and pushed him away, then took his face between her hands and kissed him and said,

"Thirty years married and still sweethearts—I sure loves my wrinkled, bald-headed boy! Go-long man with your fooling!"

He pranced around the room, rubbing his head. He chuckled, took out his pen and check book, signed a check, ripped it out and gave it to her.

"Fill in the amount yourself, old sweetheart!" he laughed. "And wait till you see the check I'm giving to Joe Rance! Then two thousand to the pastor!"

He slapped on his hat, took his cane and started toward the door.

"Man...where's you going?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"To the bank to git a pocketful of quatahs and dimes and let the kiddies scramble for them. I feel like a man that's been let outta prison into sunshine! I'm going to tell a lot of old geezers I know, to take a wallop from Conscience and be young again! Whoopee!"

Embarrassing Moments

Send your Embarrassing Moments to the Editor and it will be published.

A Slip of the Tongue

Any woman can readily appreciate the blackness of my most embarrassing moment. A friend, whom I had not seen for years, telephoned that she was in town. We made an appointment for luncheon downtown. I saw my friend before she saw me and was terribly surprised that she had aged so. I knew that she had passed through a distressing series of misfortunes but, at that, I could hardly reconcile this almost aged looking person with the young woman I'd known a few years before. As I approached her I noticed how beautifully groomed she was, just the last word in smartness, so, naturally, wanting to say something pleasant, my first impulse was to say, after the greeting was over: "My dear, how nice you are looking!" I meant it so sincerely that I would, of course, have put a great deal of zest into it, but pity me forever when I tell you that I looked at her sweetly and said with much feeling: "My dear, how old you are looking!" The old subconscious will have its say!

W. B.