FICTION FROM 'BEST SHORT STORIES' BY AFRO-AMERICAN WRITERS

Just Plain Soft Boiled

What do you think when a panhandler who beats you out of ten cents, is found to have $6,000 sewed into the lining of his coat? Things aren't always what they seem.

By Ollie Stewart

His face had much in common with an old shoe. It was wrinkled and faded and scuffed like something abused by somebody's foot. A run-over smile twisted his lips as he sidled through the door of John's Chop House.

Stella Nash, black - haired, eager, new at John's but learning rapidly, came forward smiling. She massaged the white-topped counter in front of him and gave him one of her smiles: the kind that went with a meal — like bread and butter and a glass of water.

"What's yours?"

He hesitated. His words were apologetic "Could I get a cup of coffee — and a cruller — maybe?"

Stella's smile wavered and faded. She stood there undecided until Juanita, one of the other girls, whispered loudly:

"Give 'em the air. He's a regular moocher. He looks like it."

* * *

THE LITTLE MAN must have heard, but he made no motion to leave. He just sat there and watched Stella with watery eyes; and Stella avoided his stare by turning her head.

She removed the blue menu card. "I'm sorry," she said, "but you'll have to get some money."

His eyes pleaded, his lips moved. "Lady, I'm not a regular panhandler — "

Juanita hissed: "Get wise, Stell. Show 'im the door. You gotta be hardboiled in this racket.

Stella looked from one to the other. The little man shuffled to his feet. His shoulders slumped and his eyes seemed to search the squared linoleum as he moved toward the door.

He gave Stella one last despairing glance as his fumbling hand sought and found the handle of the door. And in that instant Stella made a quick decision.

"Wait," she called. "Just a minute."

* * *

THE LITTLE MAN turned, a dull glow kindling in his weary eyes. Stella fumbled in her purse and extracted two coins.

"Sit down," she told him. "I'll let you have the coffee and crullers — and pay for them myself. How'll that be?"

"Thank you, lady," he breathed. "Thank you."

Juanita tossed her head. "When you gonna grow up, Stella? You're small-town, all right. That guy'll be back to see you tomorrow — now that he knows you're soft."

Stella flushed and said nothing. As far as Juanita and the rest were concerned, there was nothing she could say, she realized, that would justify her action. She had lost caste, and what little of their opinion she had managed to gain.

She didn't have the heart to refuse him just a cup of coffee. The old tramp looked so pitiful, she couldn't believe he could have any money.

THE MAN ATE his crullers and drank his coffee and went out, after thanking her. Stella forgot him and her own downfall in the rush that followed. But when the last mid-day diner had departed, the incident came back to haunt her as she leaned on the counter.

"I know I'm small-town," she thought, "And I don't care if they do call me soft. I can't see a human being starving to death — and not give him anything to eat."

He hadn't wanted much, she reflected. Just coffee and a cruller. And he might have been really starving. He had certainly looked it. Suppose he had tried other places, and had been refused in all of them?

Suppose she had refused him too, and he becoming faint from hunger, had fallen in the path of a speeding vehicle.

She would have been partly responsible for his death. But she rejoiced, she hadn't refused him — and she was glad she had not.

Sure, it hurt to be scorned and sniffed at by Juanita, but she knew the difference between a panhandler and a man who was just hungry. Juanita didn't. And Juanita didn't care.

* * *

DOT MACKEY, coming in on the afternoon shift, brought the news.

"A panhandler was killed down the street a little while ago," Dot announced. "He started across Church Street and fainted right in front of a big cement truck."

Stella swallowed hard. "Was he — killed? Maybe he was just hurt—"

"Cement trucks don't just hurt," Dot retorted. "And when they picked this guy up they didn't even bother to take him to a hospital. He went straight to the morgue."

* * *

IT MUST BE the same little man, Stella decided quickly. It was the same little man, she learned shortly afterward from an early edition of the evening paper. His twisted smile leered at her from his picture on the front page of the second section.

She tried to read the story, but everything blurred before her eyes. She folded the paper and laid it aside. "Maybe I'll be able to read it later," she reflected, "I gave him only coffee and crullers. so I guess I'm partly responsible after all. He might not have fainted if he'd had the price of a full meal."

Juanita was reading the paper. "Will you listen to this?" she exclaimed suddenly. "That miserly little panhandler—the same one that was in here this morning begging — had six thousand dollars sewed in the lining of his coat when he was killed. The dirty little gyp."

Stella gasped. Her mouth suddenly felt dry. "I don't believe it." she said, and snatched the paper from Juanita's gloating hands. "He wouldn't do a thing like that. He couldn't."

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BUT IT SEEMED that he had. The story spread over three columns under a glaring head — and all the facts were there. Six thousand dollars in large bills securely sewed in that shabby coat lining — and there was a photostatic reproduction of the money.

And even in death a clawlike hand seemed to clasp the hoarded wealth protectingly. Stella closed her eyes to shut out the picture. The paper fluttered from her fingers and slid to the floor.

"He couldn't do a thing like that — he couldn't," she kept repeating.

Stella was off at six. Joe Kendall was to come for her at six to take her to a show. But Joe was late. He came rushing in at six twenty.

"If we hurry, Stell," he urged, "we can still make the seven o'clock show?"

She begged. "Please, Joe — not tonight. I feel — something terrible has happened — and I feel all sick inside."

* * *

JOE JAMMED on his hat. "Okay, sister, if that's the way you feel about it—".

She caught his arm. "Joe, you've got to let me explain. Listen. . . ."

She told him all about the hungry little man, about what she had done, about his death — about the money.

"You're a sucker, that's all," Joe said, "and like all the rest of the suckers, you don't want to admit it. But don't worry; you're not the only one in this town. I've been taken for a ride myself.

"I guess everybody gets gypped at least once by guys like him. But I don't see why you should be so upset. After all, you didn't get stung but a dime's worth."

"It's not the money," Stella

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MARSE A. CALLAWAY

Master Politician

HARRY O. LEVIN

The convening of the Legislature next week brings back many recollections.

Thirty-four years ago, with the help and guidance of a master politician of his day, Mr. Marse S. Callaway, I was elected as State Senator from the Fourth Legislative District, a post now held by my distinguished friend, Senator Harry A. Cole.—H. O. Levin.

By Harry O. Levin

An Appreciation

Nearly five years ago, the AFRO-AMERICAN printed the inside story of how the humble, unpretentious school known as Morgan College, became a great state college.

Much of the credit was given to the same Marse Callaway, described as a highly intelligent and resourceful man and a shrewd and capable politician.

* * *

IN MR. CALLAWAY'S day, long before the historic school case, decided in May, 1954, most members of the dominant political party in Maryland agreed with Justice Taney's dictum in a case which brought on the Civil War, viz: that the colored man had no right which the white man was bound to respect.

A shining example was Albert C. Ritchie, four times elected Governor who resisted every effort to give any degree of justice to the colored citizens. He was immune to any claim of justice on their behalf.

As an illustration, the Legislature of 1924, at my insistence, was prodded into passing a $100,000 bond issue for the erection of a school for mentally deficient and retarded colored children similar to Rosewood for white.

No place had been provided by the state for these unfortunate children, who were thus permitted to continue to roam the streets without supervision and many of whom, through the default of the State, fell into lives of crime and became victims of disease. Ritchie vetoed the bill!

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PRIOR TO 1937, there were no colored policemen or firemen, clerks in State or City boards, magistrates, and of course no judges.

Colored children were required to attend schools of inferior calibre and no colored person could enter a law or medical school. No state authority deigned to recognize the economic or educational status of the colored citizen.

* * *

LIKE SAMUEL MORSE, inventor of the telegraph, who exclaimed, "what God hath wrought" upon completion of the first message, look at the record of achievement in the past 20 years.

Every time you see a colored police officer in Baltimore City, give thanks to the forgotten Marse Callaway.

Every action designed to give equal status to colored citizens in Maryland stems from his activities before and after the election of Governor Nice in 1934.

Of course he had help, much of it from the great editor of this paper, Dr. Carl Murphy, and from other sources.

He had friends in every strata of Maryland life, white and colored, high and low.

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ALTHOUGH Governor Nice had always been sympathetic to colored aspirations, Mr. Callaway, Dr. Murphy and this chronicler thought it essential that he make public pledges to the colored voters whose votes he solicited.

The main pledges, which seem archaic now, were (1) to appoint colored policemen (2) to provide $25,000 annually for out-of-state scholarships for colored youth who were barred from Maryland colleges and finally, to have the State take over Morgan College.

It is interesting to note that in 1953, just prior to the Supreme Court school decision, this modest amount had grown to $250,000 annually, all of which could have been avoided by doing what the Supreme Court said should be done.

(Editors Note — To be discontinued this year, the state has spent over two million dollars in such scholarships educating 10,000 or more colored youth in the finest colleges and universities of the land.)

* * *

AFTER A great legislative fight, in which every resource and weapon was brought into play, and in which Mr. Callaway took a leading part, a law was passed by the Legislature of 1935, creating a commission to consider the subject, and a commission composed of outstanding men was appointed to consider the taking over of Morgan College.

On January 15, 1937, a date which should be notable, this commission recommended that the state take over Morgan and conduct it as a state institution.

The recommendation was approved and thus the small private school was transferred into a great college whose graduates have lent lustre to the college and to the State of Maryland, and which will continue to be a beacon of education and culture.

* * *

PASSAGE OF favorable legislation and decisions of the courts opening the University of Maryland to colored youth eventually eliminated the necessity for providing funds for out-of-state colleges.

The impetus which gradually opened the doors to a degree never known before, was the indomitable courage, wisdom, strategy and exploits of Marse Callaway, whose memory me one honors or even remembers today, although every recent advance by the colored people of Maryland is a tribute to him.

Marse Callaway

He was the pioneer and he deserves better from our community.

The next structure erected by Morgan College, at least a room or division of the college, should commemorate his services to the college and to humanity by suitable inscription, and thus afford inspiration to other friends of the human race.

This Is Your Life

In 2058

Cut this out and keep it. It's a forecast made by a prominent Englishman recently on what life will be like by 2058. If one part of it is correct, you may still be around to check the rest . . . 100 years from now.

The next hundred years will give the world almost everything it hopes for now, plus a few surprises. And included is what is probably the most important thing of all—peace.

This pronouncement was given by England's Sir Alfred Blossom, chairman of the Royal Society of Arts recently.

He continues:

We shall not escape war altogether. A big power — he doesn't hint which — may cause a minor atomic war through one of its satellites.

But when the world sees the appalling results it will hold back from complete self - destruction.

And then the march to the millennium will begin.

LIFE may be amazingly prolonged, because it is likely that medical science will discover how to rejuvenate our bodies.

So — again according to Sir Alfred — it may not be too fantastic a notion to cut out this feature and keep it for 100 years.

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THE POPULATION of the world will in any case increase from its present 2,500 million to 6,000 or 8,000 million souls. The great majority colored.

Food to keep them alive will be produced if necessary by changing the climate to grow more crops and using artificial insemination to breed edible animals.

* * *

MARRIAGE between white folk and the faster growing colored population will become the normal thing. Old nations will no longer exist.

The rush of mixed marriages will lower standards of behavior and morals at first. This crudeness will be corrected by an intense cultivation of the arts.

* * *

WORK will cease to be boring. Psychologists will find out a child's natural bent and guide him to a job he will enjoy Everyone will have a job of some sort, but it will take up less of his time.

Health will be maintained by regular compulsory check-ups, more frequent as we grow old.

Hospitals will move to open country leaving only emergency stations in towns. Cancer, colds, rheumatics and the rest of them will be beaten by health training from childhood and new drugs to be created.

* * *

HOMES will lose all domestic servants — and the need for them. Instead of a kitchen there will be an alcove in the large living - room where food, already cooked, will be prepared automatically for eating. The turning of a dial or knob or two will produce the meal hot or cold and flavored to taste.

Almost every house will have its own car and aeroplane which will rise vertically from backyard or roof.

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DRUDGERY will be abolished by labor saving devices. Power whether for lighting, heating, cooking or air conditioning, will be picked up from a generating station by an aerial.

Many elderly folk will give up houses and flats altogether to live in caravans. These mobile homes will be double - decked and self - propelled, and will move north in summer and south in winter in search of sun or shade.

* * *

THE 2058 city will be twice or thrice the height of cities now, and have many more parks and gardens. Busy roads will be double - decked and cars will park under buildings or squares.

New roads will replace many railway lines. Some will have a highspeed track for carrying a coachlike bus at speeds up to 200 m.p.h.

The nations, says Sir. Alfred will be reasonable and co-operative. If any country makes weapons of destruction it will be instantly known and internationally condemned. A common language will make people willing to help, not destroy, one another.

And will this man-made world forget God? No. It will recognize and have faith in the Creator of it all. Man will worship God more intensely than ever before.