



PLAY MAS'

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The old woman followed the band as it chipped down Frederick Street. It was Carnival Tuesday. The sun was mercilessly hot, but no one seemed to mind. Everybody was jumping to the tune of Kitchener's "Rainorama." Everybody was gay and happy. Everybody, that is, except the old woman.

Her mouth was grim and unfriendly. Her hard eyes followed a young woman who was in the middle of the crowd a little distance ahead. The young woman was evidently having a grand time. A little boy walked beside her, holding on to her dress, struggling to keep up with her; but she did not pay much attention to him.

The old woman shook her head and pursed her lips. She never did understand what her son had seen in this woman. She had warned him that the woman was no good, but he still had insisted on marrying her.

When the marriage didn't work out and her son had complained to her, she had told him, "You make your bed, Son, you must lie in it." But deep down inside she had felt hurt and sad—hurt because he had not taken her advice in the first place, and sad because, after all, he was her only son, and he was not happy.

The crowd moved noisily forward, everyone yelling "Yah" to the various lines of Kitchener's calypso. The old woman walked quietly on the fringe of the crowd, still keeping her eyes on her daughter-in-law.

She thought of the time when Michael was born. Her first grandson! She remembered how she had longed to see him, to take him in her arms and cuddle him as only a fond grandmother could. But she had rarely had that privilege, because by then she had not been on speaking terms with her daughter-in-law. On the odd occasion when her son had brought little Michael to see her, she had showered on him all the love she could.

Then there had been that terrible car accident in which her son had been killed. Little Michael had been only three years old at the time. What would become of him? That had been her constant worry in those early days after the funeral. Now, two years later, it was her constant worry still. How she wished she could be the one to take care of Michael! She felt that his mother was not a fit person to look after a young child. She was too fond of wild company, and often for hours on end, she left Michael alone in the house while she went gadding about with her friends.

The old woman had heard about this, and she hated her daughter-in-law all the more for it. It was several months now since they had seen each other face to face. Even now, as she followed the band down the street, the old woman made sure that Michael's mother did not see her.

The band came to a sudden standstill. Some of the revellers fell out of line and slumped down on the

pavement, glad of the brief respite. Jour Ouvert morning and Carnival Monday seemed a long way past.

The band struck up another lively tune. This time it was Sparrow's "Mas' in May." Regaining energy, the crowd surged forward and they turned into Hart Street.

"Walk, nuh, child," Michael's mother tugged occasionally at the little five-year-old boy by her side. "Better I had leave you home!"

Manfully, Michael struggled along, trying to keep up with his mother. He didn't want her to get angry with him. But he was tired, so tired! His little feet ached. And the noise of the pans and the crowd was beginning to make his head hurt. He wished that Mama really had left him at home.

Faintly through the noise of the steel pans and the chanting and shouting of the people, there came to his ears the sound of a bell ringing. Michael knew that sound only too well.

There was a man standing on Hart Street with a Sno-Cone cart. The little boy was thirsty.

"Mama," he begged, "a Sno-Cone, please." But his Mama did not hear him. Or even if she did, she took no notice of him.

Michael's mouth watered. His little hand slipped from his mother's grasp. Mama was talking and laughing with her friends. She did not notice.

"January say doan ask me," chanted the crowd as they continued chipping along the street. Now they were turning into St. Vincent Street.

“I wouldn’ta miss this for all de world,” said Michael’s mother to a friend.

“But wait, where Michael?” asked her friend.

Michael’s mother laughed. “He? He all right, man. He must be stop somewhere. But not to bother, chile. He all right, I sure. The police does see about little children that los’.”

“Is true,” said the friend. “But now I come to remember, ent last year he los’ and yuh find ’im at de Police Station Ash Wednesday morning?”

“Yes,” said the young woman. “That is why I ent worry. If I did leave him home for de two days, people woulda talk. But if he los’ the Police go take good care of ’im. Leh we go, gal.”

“I have New Year’s Day,” came the words of Sparrow’s calypso.

And Michael’s mother and her friend moved on with the band.

On Ash Wednesday morning a group of women gathered outside Police Headquarters. They looked somewhat sleepy and tired, but their spirits were still quite gay. Carnival ended, it was time for them to collect their children. They were sure the Police had them safe. This was merely an annual routine affair. And Michael’s mother was among the group! Her friend who had jumped along with her on the day before was there with her too.

“But suppose Michael ent here?” she ventured.

Michael's mother laughed at the idea. "Is here 'e must be," she retorted. The idea had never dawned on her that he might not be there. "Is here 'e was last year."

Some of the women collected their children and left.

"She just walk 'way and leave me. I hunt everywhere and couldn't find she," one or two of them explained to the policeman who handed over their respective children to them, criticizing them for being such thoughtless mothers.

Once away from the precincts of the Police Station, one of the mothers muttered, "Is all right fuh dem! Carnival is we fete! How dey expect we go tie down weself wid little children? Dat is what de Police dere for. Ent?"

Meanwhile, Michael's mother was becoming frantic. No one had seen him anywhere. It was one thing to let him wander away on Carnival Tuesday and not bother. Lots of women did that, knowing that the Police would take care of the children. But not to find him on Ash Wednesday morning? That was another kettle-of-fish.

"You ent see 'im at all, at all, at all?" she kept asking. Then she turned away from the Police, held her head between her hands and began to bawl.

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In her little yard somewhere in the country, an old woman was feeding her chickens.

“Chick, chick, chick,” she called, as she scattered the grain on the ground for them.

From inside the house came the sound of a radio. A well-known calypso was being played.

“Time certainly change!” said the old woman to herself. “Long ago, on Ash Wednesday, was only hymns you hearin’.”

“Play mas’,” blared forth the radio.

The old woman looked at the little boy who was running behind the chickens and trying to catch them. A broad smile broke over her face, and her eyes were soft with love and the memory of yesterday. How he had enjoyed that big Sno-Cone she had bought for him!

“Play mas’,” she echoed, and she danced to where Michael was and hugged him.