

*Money is plentiful for those who understand the  
simple laws which govern its acquisition.*  
—George Clason

## *A Lady Named Mary*

The Paul Smith Story

**I**t was almost midnight when I went looking for a way out, or at least something to take my mind away from my bills. The dead of night has a way of making some problems seem unbearable. It was the worst night of my life. I could not sit at the desk another minute.

I wasn't in the midst of a life-and-death struggle with cancer, nor was I embroiled in a nasty divorce. My circumstances were more mundane but, to me, every bit as painful as any life-and-death struggle.

It was the time of the month when I had to spend an evening at my desk paying bills. The evening had started out on a painful note when I examined a yellow card from the post office informing me that I had a registered letter from the IRS. I didn't cheat on my taxes, but was worried I had been a little too creative. I was a sales rep for a furniture manufacturer and always seemed to be spending personal money on business without getting receipts. At tax time, I usually gave myself a generous

## **The 4 Laws of Financial Prosperity**

deduction to cover these undocumented expenses. Now I was sure they were going to audit me, and even if they told me I had to come up with another \$2,000 or go to jail, I wouldn't be able to find \$2,000. Pushing the yellow card to the back of the desk, hoping it might get lost, I prayed the custodian at the IRS would inadvertently push my file into a wastebasket.

Then I started the gruesome task of paying bills, beginning with the small ones.

I made minimum payments on the five charge cards, trying to ignore the late fees and the small print describing finance charges of 18% to 25% on the unpaid balances.

I made an interest-only payment on the home equity loan, then examined a rejection letter from the company where I had applied for a second home equity loan. I had responded to their advertising, which claimed: "If you need money, get it out of your house. We give 100%, not 80% like those other home equity companies!" In the rejection letter, they said they couldn't make the loan because I didn't have sufficient income to make the payments. I threw the letter in the trash wondering about the banker mentality—the more you needed money the less they were inclined to loan it to you. It didn't seem fair that money is always more available to those who don't seem to need money.

Then I opened the letter from the vehicle leasing company announcing the lease on my car was finished. I was supposed to turn it in to the leasing dealer along with a check for \$1,867 to cover the high-mileage penalty. This made me mad. My lease payments were higher than monthly purchase payments would have been, and now I owed almost \$2,000 extra. How would I ever find enough money for a down payment on a new car? I was trapped.

In the pile of bills, I found a glimmer of hope. Through a cellophane window on the front of one of the envelopes, I could see my name and address printed on a check. I ripped it open.

## **A Lady Named Mary**

It was a check for \$1,500. Who would be sending me that kind of money?

A car dealer. The letter said I could use the check as part of the down payment on a new vehicle. Of course, in order to validate it, I had to show it to the sales manager before I started dealing on the new car. I knew their game. Raise the price \$1,500, then send out \$1,500 checks to all the suckers like me. I threw the check in the trash.

I paid all the utility bills, but I didn't have enough to make the house payment. I had initiated an overdraw feature on my checking account six months earlier so the bank would automatically cover overdrafts, but I was already over the \$2,000 limit, was paying 18% on the balance, and would have to start making payments on that next month. I had used the last of the overdraw credit to make the house payment the month before, so I couldn't use the overdraft to make the current house payment.

I got up from the desk and tiptoed into the bedroom where my wife, Judy, was sleeping. Without turning on the light, I felt around in the bottom of the closet for our file box that contained the password master sheet for our online accounts. I returned to my desk to log into Judy's checking account, hoping she might have enough balance to cover the house payment.

I wasn't surprised to find no balance at all. Like me, she made purchases using her debit card, hoping she didn't overdraw the account. She sold real estate, and the spring months had been slow. It had been more than thirty days since her last commission, leaving her account in the same dire place as mine.

Tucked in the small compartment on top of the file box was a piece of white paper, folded up tight with the corner exposed. I pulled it out and unfolded it. My motivation wasn't so much curiosity as the need to do something, anything, in an effort to control my growing nightmare.

## **The 4 Laws of Financial Prosperity**

The paper was a receipt from one of those expensive boutique shops that lures its unsuspecting victims in to browse. The purchased item listed on the receipt was an artificial Christmas tree.

How well I remembered that tree, and the trauma it had brought into my life at Christmastime. At first, Judy had brought home a live tree. After two nights of unsuccessful attempts to get me to string the lights on it, she expressed her frustration by going to the boutique and charging \$200 on her VISA card to buy that artificial tree with the lights already in place. I was furious, but the tree stayed.

Now as I looked at the receipt, I realized Judy had deceived me. Yes, she had charged \$200 on the VISA. She had also given the store a check for \$200 and another \$200 in cash. She had paid \$600 for the tree! And she had disguised the price by splitting up the payment. She normally didn't do things like this. Apparently, putting lights on the tree had been a lot more important to her than I had supposed. I had been insensitive to her needs and deserved the punishment she had dished out—a \$600 Christmas tree. It seemed I hadn't done anything right lately.

I headed into the garage to get the double-edged lumber axe. It was in the corner with the garden tools. Without putting on the safety goggles, I turned on the grinder and sharpened both edges. Boy, was Judy going to be sorry.

The artificial tree was in one of the plywood cabinets in the garage. I dragged it onto the front lawn and chopped it into little pieces. When there was nothing bigger than six inches, I buried the axe into the little sycamore tree we had been nursing along. Then I decided to take a walk before I did something really dangerous.

My head was a little calmer now. Swinging the big axe had helped, but none of my financial problems had gone away. The stupidity of what I had just done was settling in and so was the reality of our difficult financial situation. I needed to find some money, or my life would be in shambles.

## **A Lady Named Mary**

I remembered thinking when I had graduated from college, I would have a great life if I worked hard and increased my earnings to about \$70,000 a year. That was my dream, and I had achieved it. With commissions and bonuses, my income ranged from \$68,000 to \$75,000 a year, yet I couldn't afford to buy a wreath for my own funeral. I was wasting a \$600 Christmas tree in the middle of the night because I couldn't pay my bills and was more miserable than I had been in my entire life. What was wrong? Where could I find the money to get out of this terrible predicament?

As I walked, I had an idea to go back home, draft a letter to my boss outlining all of the reasons I deserved a substantial pay raise and demand that if I didn't get it, effective immediately, she could consider the letter my resignation notice. Dumb idea! I needed the income, liked my job, and knew that with the current economic climate a raise of any kind was not in the cards. I kept walking.

It was long past midnight, and only one other house in the neighborhood had lights on.

As I walked up Maple Street, I could see an elderly woman through one of the front windows. She was sitting in an overstuffed chair, reading something. The name on the mailbox was M. Sessions. Her first name was Mary. I didn't know her well, only that she had a full-time gardener. She drove a late-model Mercedes, and sometimes chauffeurs picked her up. She lived alone in a house that would appraise for more than half a million dollars. I guessed she was in her late sixties or early seventies. In my occasional conversations with her, she had seemed friendly and articulate.

The thought occurred to me that maybe Mrs. Sessions would loan me some money. Reflecting back on our conversations over the years, I wished I had taken the time to get to know her better. But, at this moment, there was no time for building a strong, lasting friendship. I needed money now.

## The 4 Laws of Financial Prosperity

Mustering courage, I tiptoed onto the porch and knocked on the door. I took a step back from the door, smiled and waved my hand slightly so she could recognize me from the image captured by her porch security camera.

“Nice to know I’m not the only one who can’t sleep,” she said brightly, asking if Judy and the kids were okay as she opened the door.

There was an elegant quality about Mary Sessions. Even though her neatly-cropped hair was gray, there was a vibrant, healthy look about her. Her eyes were the color of Navajo turquoise, and had an intense, piercing quality rarely seen. She had fewer wrinkles than women half her age, even in the middle of the night with no makeup.

I asked her if she had a padded cell in her house.

“What in the world for?” she asked, laughing. I was pleased that she found my comment funny. Quickly, in my mind, I condensed my financial predicament and blurted it out, ending with, “If I don’t find some money fast, I think I might just turn myself over to the local jailer, because that’s where they’ll be putting me if I can’t pay my bills.”

There was a lighthearted tone in my voice as I made this last statement. I didn’t want her to think I was really serious, but deep down in my heart, I wasn’t sure if I wouldn’t land in jail.

“You are asking me for a loan?” she asked.

“Yes, I think money would be better than jail.”

“I have never loaned money to a neighbor before,” she said, hesitating. “But I suppose there’s a first time for everything. Would you like to come in?” Pushing the door all the way open, she stepped back, allowing me to enter.

“Mr. Smith, how much do you need?” she asked.

“Please call me Paul. I think ten thousand would stop the bleeding,” I said, suddenly wishing I hadn’t said it, feeling ashamed at my audacity for dropping such a request at one in the morning on a 70-year-old woman I hardly knew.

She began to laugh.

## A Lady Named Mary

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m just relieved. A neighbor shows up in the middle of the night asking for a padded cell or money, so I naturally assume he needs some real money, not just pocket change. Glad I was wrong.”

Who was this woman who thought ten thousand dollars was pocket change?

“Twenty thousand would stop the bleeding and put a nice dressing on the wound,” I said, suddenly feeling greedy enough to double my request.

“First you ask for ten, then for twenty. Sounds like you really don’t know how much you need,” she said. “No wonder the bank wouldn’t give you money.”

I had the sick feeling I had just blown a wonderful opportunity. I should not have been greedy.

“How did you know the bank wouldn’t give me money?” I asked, suspecting that perhaps she owned the bank.

“Just a hunch,” she winked. “Would you like to play some chess while we work this out?”

My idea of fun did not include playing chess in the middle of the night with a woman old enough to be my mother. But if a little chess would get me a loan, why not?

“Sure,” I said, with pretended enthusiasm. We seated ourselves on sofas at opposite ends of a coffee table. The playing board and pieces were already in place. I decided to let her win, thinking that might improve my chances of getting the money.

We hadn’t been playing very long when she went over to a desk, shuffled through one of the drawers, then returned with a little book in her hand. It was a register for a savings account.

“Most of my money is in stocks, bonds, and real estate,” she explained, “but I keep a little bit in a savings account for emergencies.” She tossed the register on the table in front of me, nodding for me to look inside. I did so, carefully memorizing the balance: \$147,952.34.

### **The 4 Laws of Financial Prosperity**

“I suppose your coming here could be considered an emergency,” she offered.

“It is for me,” I said, very sincerely, still holding onto the register, hardly daring to hope that Mary Sessions might actually give me money.

As we continued the game of chess, I realized I didn’t have to let her win. She was going to win whether I wanted to let her or not.

“Look,” she said thoughtfully, when we were almost finished, “I don’t like throwing good money after bad.”

My hopes sank into the bottom of my shoes. She wasn’t going to give me the money after all.

“I would feel a lot better about loaning you money if I thought it would do some good,” she countered.

“Oh, it will,” I assured her. “I’ll make my house payment; buy hamburger and potatoes for the children to eat. None of it will be spent frivolously.”

“You probably think I’m a silly old widow with more money than sense,” she said.

“Oh no,” I lied, wondering how she could read my mind.

“We were a month behind on the rent when my husband died,” she said, suddenly changing the direction of our conversation. She leaned back, forgetting the chess game.

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your sympathy, not anymore. I had three small children, no insurance, no savings, and no marketable skills. Do you have any idea what it is like getting food for your children in the trash bins behind grocery stores? When the clerks caught me, I told them I was looking for produce for my pet pig.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I tried hard to picture this elegant woman foraging through trash bins in search of food scraps for her babies. I couldn’t imagine.



## A Lady Named Mary

“But, what about all this?” I asked, pointing to the expensive surroundings and the register. “How did you get from there to here? And don’t tell me you worked really hard. I know a lot of people who work hard and never accomplish anything like this. I’m one of them.”

“I didn’t start out with a job like you have,” she said. “You have no idea how blessed you are. There are a lot of people who would do anything for the chance to drive around in a new car, calling on furniture stores.”

“If my job is so wonderful, why am I so miserable and so broke?”

“It’s one thing to work hard, and quite another to work smart. Do you really want to know how I did it, and how you can do it too?”

“Of course.”

“Do you think you can trust an old woman?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I asked.

“If I am going to help you, teach you, and loan you money, I have to know everything about your financial life. You will have to trust me, like you would a banker asking for financial information. Do you think you can do that?”

“You want financial statements, balance sheets, stuff like that?” I asked.

“And more.”

“Like what?” I asked. She got up and went over to the desk. She returned with another savings register, but when she handed it to me, I could see this one was blank.

“Write your name on it,” she said.

“Am I going to open a savings account?” I asked, hoping she had decided to make a deposit in my name.

“No,” she said. “We can’t determine how much you need until we know how much you have and how you are spending it. For the next thirty days, I want you to track your daily expenses and every other financial transaction by writing them down. If you spend a dollar for a Coke, write it down in this

## **The 4 Laws of Financial Prosperity**

book. If you charge gas on your VISA, write it down. If you write a check, make a deposit or a withdrawal from the money machine, write it down. I want every financial transaction in your life written down in this little book.”

“You’re asking a lot,” I complained. “I don’t ever write anything in a register.”

“Two or three minutes a day, at most,” she shot back. “If you are not willing to do that, then there’s nothing I can do to help you.”

“I’ll do it,” I promised.

“Checkmate,” she said, yawning while making her last move. It was time for me to leave.

“What about my house? I can’t make the payment. You said you would loan me money. What about that?” I realized I was being pushy, but I was desperate.

“You won’t lose your house in thirty days,” she said. “It will take at least that long for you to master the discipline of tracking daily expenses.”

“Then you will loan me the money?” I was determined to pin her down, get an answer, one way or the other.

“As I said earlier,” she responded, thoughtfully, “I don’t like throwing good money away. Until you learn the laws of financial success, you frankly are a bad credit risk.”

“I suppose there are fifty laws,” I said, starting to feel that I had gotten my hopes up for nothing.

“Altogether, I suppose there could be that many, perhaps more. But there are only four main laws,” she said, beginning to rub her chin thoughtfully. There was a long silence as we looked into each other’s eyes. I had no idea what was going on in her head, only that something serious was happening, and it would be best for me not to disturb the silence.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” she said, finally, her words slow and deliberate. “When you have demonstrated to me that you have mastered the four laws, I’ll loan you all the money you want.”

## A Lady Named Mary

“I don’t believe you,” I said, emotion in my voice. I felt like I was going to cry. She had no right to toy with me like this.

“You don’t trust me?” she asked.

“Get real,” I said, starting to feel angry. “Remember the days when you were scrounging in the garbage bins? If a grocery clerk had offered to give you all the money you wanted, would you have believed him? Or would you have laughed at him?”

“I would have slapped him for being so cruel,” she said.

“Now you know how I feel.” Again there was a long pause as we looked into each other’s eyes.

“I’ll put it in writing,” she said, turning and walking over to the desk. All I wanted to do was go home, but I waited in silence as she scribbled something on a piece of paper.

When she finally handed me the paper, I could hardly believe what I was reading.

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*Being of sound mind, I, Mary Sessions, do hereby agree to loan money to my neighbor, Paul Smith, when he has demonstrated to my satisfaction that he has mastered the four laws of financial success. No collateral will be required for said loan. The interest rate will be 8%; the terms of payback will be negotiated at the time the loan is made, and the amount shall not exceed \$2,000,000.*

*Mary Sessions*

I was speechless. Carefully I folded up the paper and placed it in my pocket, along with the blank register. As I walked home, I had the strongest feeling that Mary Sessions was going to change my life. I was determined to do all she asked. I also decided I needed to impress her by winning the next chess game.