

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

In the play, written by Christopher Marlowe (1546-1593), called, 'The Jew of Malta', there is this sentence: 'Excess wealth is cause of covetousness.' How very true! More than 400 years ago did this great dramatist and poet make observations that are as true, in his day, as they are in today's world. We see it all too often in Hongkong: People with more money than sense, buy, buy and buy ... just for the sheer sake of having people say: 'Wow! He (or she) is so rich!' Strangely, when one is sailing blue water ('blue water sailing' means out at sea with only one's ability and knowledge to keep one out of danger), money is of absolutely no value, at all. The important things on a sloop in the middle of an ocean are a plentiful supply of drinking water, nourishing food, shade from the burning sun, or, alternatively, a sufficiency of warm clothing when inclement weather comes one's way. It is in such an environment that one realises what is important in life. Certainly, money is not of any great importance when a tsunami is approaching or when one is becalmed near the equator. In Hongkong, of late, we have come to learn of the excessive greed of certain people. The sum of many hundreds of millions of dollars is insufficient to some people: They want hundreds of billions of dollars. What can a person do with so much money? What can a person achieve with 12 zeros after that first digit in one's bank account? Has Hongkong become a territory whereby one is measured and, then, admired, by the amount of money that is known to be his or her estate? Money is, as I have always told Bo-Bo, my froglike husband, something akin to the sea. One may go to the seashore and spend a year there, trying to mop up the sea water, but, come the morning, there is more seawater to be mopped up. Seawater and money: There is an infinite supply of both. It has always been so and shall always be so.

According to The Frog, I do not appreciate the importance of money. 'If I did not have the money to give you, I would like to see just how far you could go to one of your many favourite boutiques in order to buy a new dress, or new shoes, or new coat,' The Frog pontificated. He was watching that television programme, again. You know the one with those spindly young females, trying to be the next top model in the US. I was tempted to hide his remote, television control again, but decided against it and walked away in a huff, thinking to myself: 'I'll get him, later.' And, then, I hummed the tune from the musical, My Fair Lady:

*'Just you wait, 'enry 'iggins, just you wait!
You'll be sorry, but your tears'll be too late!
You'll be broke, and I'll have money;
Will I help you? Don't be funny!
Just you wait, 'enry 'iggins, just you wait!
Just you wait, 'enry 'iggins, till you're sick,
And you scream to fetch a doctor double-quick.
I'll be off a second later And go straight to the the-ater!
Oh ho ho, 'enry 'iggins, just you wait!'*

I went back to my reading in order to strengthen my argument about the futility of amassing silly amounts of that medium of exchange, called money. I recalled the biography of Ludwig van Beethoven and his

wonderful musical successes. How much money would he have been willing to part with just to have his hearing restored in order to listen to his musical compositions, now considered works of a musical genius? He lived only for 57 years and died in 1827. About 9 years before his death, he became completely deaf. He never heard his Symphony Number 9, which was completed in 1824. This masterful piece of work is remembered to this day and is played so often that it is a toss-up as to whether or not this symphony is performed more than Georges Bizet's 'Carmen' which was completed in 1875. Ludwig van Beethoven, it is recorded, just about withdrew from the world that he knew due to his deafness, which hit him very hard in 1818. When he died in Vienna, Austria, on March 26, 1827, his funeral was attended by tens of thousands of his admirers. The music of this genius lives on to this day. He left behind little in the way of earthly wealth, but he left, for all humanity and for all eternity, something much more valuable than money: His music.

I rushed back to confront The Frog with my intelligence. He was still watching the skinny little girls with the tiny little ... you know what. I switched off the television, perfunctorily, and started my monologue about the futility of amassing great sums of money, ending with the sentence: 'So you see, my darling husband, money is not as important as you may think.' And to this, I smugly stated: 'I am going to take lessons on how to play the piano along with some lessons on musical theory!' The Frog looked at me as though he thought that I was mad. Then, his look turned to a kind of evil stare. You know, what I mean. It was that look that I hate. But, then, he shocked me when, in a most gentle and loving voice, he said: 'Don't you need a new chinchilla coat? It is getting cold, these days.' Surprised, but pleasantly so, I agreed that, in fact, my coat was more than 3 years old. 'My dear wife,' The Frog continued, 'Let me give you an open cheque so that you may go to buy a new coat. It is, only, money, after all, isn't it?' 'Yes, yes! I agree!' I blurted out without thinking, almost like a nervous reaction – because I was just too flabbergasted to think of anything else to say.

And so that was how I was able to buy a new chinchilla coat, My Dear Grandchild. The Frog had learned a lesson. I allowed him to continue to watch that television programme while I rushed down to Pacific Place lest he change his mind. Yes, My Dear Grandchild, earthly wealth is as fleeting as a summer's shower. Works of greatness live forever.

And I just love my new chinchilla coat. But I never was able to find a piano teacher that I liked. One day, maybe ...

Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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