

COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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No. 6

Dignity of Trade	Elbert Hubbard	
Frontispiece—The Real Cow-Boy (In color).	Frank Tenney Johnson	
The Fight Against Alcohol		
Illustrated from photographs		
World-Wide Significance of the Movement	Arthur Brisbane	549
Why I am a Total Abstainer	Alexander Alison	554
Temperance or Prohibition	Gustave Pabst	558
The Road to Romance. A Story	Howard E. Morton	561
Illustrated by Harrison Fisher		
The Cradle Song. A Poem	Marion Forster Gilmore	566
The Meanest Man that ever Lived. A Story	Bruno Lessing	567
Illustrated in color by Charles B. Falls		
The Salting of the Golden Rule. A Story	Alfred Henry Lewis	575
Illustrated by W. Herbert Dunton		
If War Should Come! First Article—The		
Question of Preparedness	Capt. R. P. Hobson	584
Illustrated from photographs		
The Fall of Hummel	Arthur Train	594
Illustrated from photographs		
Just Betty. A Story	———?	602
Illustrated by Wallace Morgan		
Mid-Wood Spirit. A Poem	Genevieve Farnell	609
The Tyranny of Clothes	Alan Dale	610
Theatrical Portraits		613
The Kingdom of Earth—Chapters XXVI-XXX.	Anthony Partridge	620
Illustrated by A. B. Wensell		
The New Philosopher's Stone	Garrett P. Serviss	632
The Man on the Stairs. A Story	Mary Hastings	636
Illustrated by Henry Raleigh		
The Choice. A Poem	Beth Slater Whitson	642
The Lumberjack. A Story	Will Kirk	643
Stirring Adventures of a Toy Bear	Frank VerBeck	646
Illustrated in color by the author		
The Long Arm of Mannister—VII	E. Phillips Oppenheim	649
Illustrated by Frank Snapp		
The Greater Resurrection. A Poem	James Leroy Stockton	654
Magazine Shop-Talk		655
Small Contributions	Ambrose Bierce	657
Cover Design.	J. O. Brubaker	

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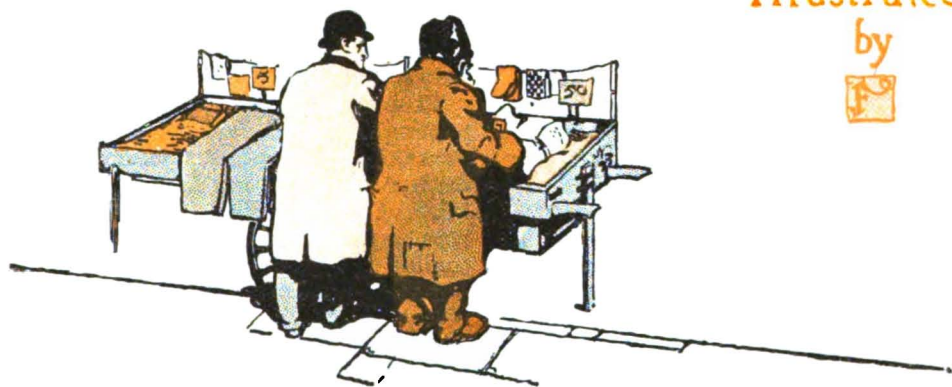
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THE MEANEST MAN THAT EVER LIVED

BY BRUNO LESSING

Illustrated
by

COHEN, the tailor, the fat old fellow with the long gray beard who used to sell his wares from open carts in the Hester Street mart, gave a *bar mitzva* party in honor of his grandson Davy, who had just completed his thirteenth year. There were many guests; I among them. Cohen, seated at the head of the table, had told a story of a mean man. This man, a perfect stranger, had purchased a pair of trousers at Cohen's cart. While Cohen was wrapping them up, the stranger deftly relieved him of his gold watch. Then he gave Cohen a twenty-dollar bill, which he knew Cohen would have to go some distance to change. In his absence the stranger walked off with the cart. Incidentally, the twenty-dollar bill was counterfeit.

"Oh, such meanness! He iss der meanest

man in New York! He iss der meanest man in der United States in America!"

Little Davy, leaning on his elbows, had listened to the story with the grave interest of childhood. "Iss he der meanest man in der whole world, gran'pa?" he asked.

Cohen puffed at his pipe for a moment and deliberated calmly. Then he nodded. "Yes! Der meanest man in der whole world!"

"Iss he der meanest man vot ever lifed in der world?" asked Davy, with that eagerness that children always possess to fix the exact status of a matter.

Cohen looked at the face of one of his guests, who promptly fastened his eyes upon the ceiling. Then he looked at another, who became interested in a crumb that lay before him. Then he gazed at another, who shut his eyes and seemed to be plunged in thought. And so on, slowly,

until his gaze had roamed over the faces of some dozen of his old cronies, all of whom seemed to show a sudden aversion to the topic that was being discussed. He then turned to his grandson and, with a faint smile, "No, Davy," said he. "Dere vas vunce a meaner man. But it iss time for you to be in bed."

Which is how I came to learn the story.

Nobody in the Ghetto had the faintest idea how rich old Rosenheim was. He owned property, and he had bank-accounts, and the little printing business that he conducted, with no one but young Brandes to help him, was, the gossips guessed, fairly lucrative. But of the actual extent of his possessions no one could speak definitely. This ignorance was not due to a lack of discussion of the matter, however. Rosenheim, being a clever old chap, a charming companion, and, at the same time, the most miserly human being who had ever made a dollar in the Ghetto, was a most interesting subject for gossip in every coffee-house from Houston Street to East Broadway. And while many a hint was dropped in his presence in the hope of eliciting some voluntary information on his part, there was, with all his miserly habits, a certain dignity about the man that forbade inquisitive questioning.

In the coffee-houses of the Ghetto the great American institution of "treating" has but a bare foothold. Each man, as a rule, pays for himself and is heedless of what his neighbor does. Night after night Rosenheim would sit with groups that were eating, drinking, or playing cards, chatting as gaily as the rest of them but never, if he could possibly help it, spending a cent. He lived in a bare room and cooked his own breakfast. He purchased his midday meal at the fruit-stand that had the cheapest fruit. The evening meal, however—ah! that was the wrench—always cost money.

"Money," he frequently would say to Brandes, his workman, "is the hardest thing in the world to get. It takes work, brains, and sacrifice to get it. Yet why do the fools who are lucky enough to get a little of it throw it away so carelessly? Tell me that, Brandes!"

"You're just stingy! That's all that's the matter with you!" was Brandes's invariable reply. Rosenheim's keen blue eyes would always twinkle at this frank rejoinder.

One Shabbas day in summer Rosenheim sat idly in front of his printing-shop thinking and thinking and chuckling to himself for hour after hour. It was a cheap way of spending the day. Then, suddenly, he burst into a roar of laughter that made the passers-by stare at him as if he were mad. When the sun had set he went to the house of Cohen, his lawyer.

"Cohen," said he, "for how much will you write me a will?"

"Fifteen dollars," was the lawyer's prompt reply.

Rosenheim shook his head. "I only want a little bit of a will. A five-dollar will is good enough for me. Not a cent more will I pay."

The lawyer knew Rosenheim and knew that he would either draw up the will for five dollars or not draw it up at all. He drew it up.

"The house in Rivington Street, and my printing-business," said Rosenheim, "I want to leave to—to Mister Somebody. All the rest of my property I want to leave to Mister Somebody Else. That is all you have to put in the will. Just write it according to law. Then I will copy it and put in the names."

The lawyer, chagrined at the man's secretiveness as to his intended legatees, told him that wills were never made out in that manner.

"Never mind," said Rosenheim. "That's the way I want mine made out. Besides, why can't I fill in the names as well as anybody else?"

The lawyer had no answer. "But," he explained, "it is necessary to have an executor or several executors, and the will must be signed in the presence of witnesses."

"I will have witnesses present when I sign it," said Rosenheim. "But what about those executors? What are they for?"

"Well, when you're dead the executors are the people who see that your will is carried out."

"Do they have to be paid? Do I have to leave them anything?"

"No. The law provides that they get a certain percentage of the estate unless they agree beforehand to serve for nothing."

Rosenheim slapped his sides with glee. "Good!" he exclaimed. "Put in Mister Somebody as executor. Put in two Mister Somebodies. And don't say anything about

their not getting paid. They deserve to get something."

When Rosenheim departed he carried the outline of his simple will in his pocket. That night, all by himself, he set up the form of the will in type, leaving the names in blank, and carefully printed a copy. The type itself he locked in his safe. Then, whistling cheerfully, he went to bed.

The next night, in Fuchs's coffee-house, he called Rosnofsky, the butcher, and Fishlovitz, the fur-dealer, aside. "Friends," he said, "as long as I have known you, you have been kind to me. You, Fishlovitz, once treated me to a dinner, and you, Rosnofsky, twice sent me a kosher bologna for a present. The time has come for your reward. Here is my will. To Fishlovitz I leave a house. One house for one dinner. Rosnofsky was good to me two times. All the rest of what I have will go to him. Besides, I am not feeling well. I drink too much port wine, which the doctor says is bad for me. But when I am gone you will have your reward."

The two men gazed at Rosenheim and at each other with stupefied faces, and then, the full significance of the matter dawning upon them, with one accord they embraced him.

"Angel man!" cried Fishlovitz. "I always said you had a noble heart!"

"Dear friend!" murmured Rosnofsky. "You must take good care of yourself. Let me get you a glass of port wine."

Rosenheim drank the port wine. He loved port wine as a cat loves milk. Then he showed them his will with their names written in the proper spaces.

"One thing more is necessary," he said. "A will must have executors to see that it is properly carried out. Who would you like to be executors? Give me the names of two men. They will each get some money for their trouble."

"Can't we be the executors?" asked Fishlovitz. "What's the use of wasting money!"

Rosenheim shook his head. "They must be different men," he said.

"Well," said Rosnofsky, after a moment's thought, "you can put down Meyer, my brother-in-law, for one."

"And Sammy Greenburg, my uncle, for the other," said Fishlovitz.

The names were inserted, a couple of waiters served as witnesses, and the will was given to Rosnofsky to keep in his safe.

"Now," said Fishlovitz, "you all come to my house and we celebrate with champagne."

"One thing I forgot," said Rosenheim on his way to Fishlovitz's house. "It must be a secret. If our friends hear of it they



SAT IDLY IN FRONT OF HIS PRINTING-SHOP
THINKING AND THINKING

will feel bad, and maybe I will have to change the will and leave them something."

"Rosenheim," they both swore, "it is the secret of our lives!"

During the following month Rosenheim dined alternately at the homes of his two legatees. He grew fat and merry. Never was there such a jovial companion as Rosenheim. He was well versed in Talmudic lore and could tell entertaining stories by the hour. The women folk, particularly, loved to listen to him. And at Fuchs's coffee-house, in the evening, Fishlovitz and Rosnofsky vied with each other in buying things for Rosenheim to eat and drink.

Rosnofsky caught cold one day and sent for the doctor.

"H'm!" said the doctor. "Why don't you take better care of yourself? There's Rosenheim, for instance. He's the man who knows how to take care of himself. He never catches cold. Follow his example, and you will never be sick."

While the doctor wrote out a prescription Rosnofsky pondered. "Is Rosenheim a very healthy man?" he finally asked.

"Healthy? That man ought to live to be a hundred years old!"

All that afternoon Rosnofsky pondered. In the evening he sent for Fishlovitz. "Look here, Fishlovitz," he blurted out, the moment the latter entered the room, "how long are we going to put up with that Rosenheim business?"



THE NEXT NIGHT, IN FUCHS'S COFFEE-HOUSE, HE CALLED ROSNOFSKY, THE BUTCHER, AND FISHLOVITZ, THE FUR-DEALER, ASIDE



ALL THAT AFTERNOON ROSNOFSKY PONDERED

"What business?" asked Fishlovitz.

"Oh, of feeding him and buying him things to eat and drink. Do you know that we are supporting him between us? The old miser hasn't spent a cent since the day he made out that will, and to-day my doctor says he ought to live till he's a hundred years old. We will be dead before he will."

Then Fishlovitz did some pondering. "Did your doctor really say that?" he finally asked.

"Sure he did. He says Rosenheim's the healthiest man he ever saw."

"H'm!" said Fishlovitz. "I guess you are right."

Rosenheim arrived at the Fishlovitz house at supper-time.

"What!" exclaimed Fishlovitz, "have you already had your supper?"

"No," said Rosenheim, in surprise. "I thought I would eat with you to-night."

Fishlovitz shook his head. "It is such a pity!" he said. "We have no supper to-night. This is the anniversary of my grandfather's death, and I fast to-day."

Rosenheim's face fell, but in an instant his good-spirits returned. "Do not worry," he said reassuringly, "I will eat with Rosnofsky. Did I tell you that to-morrow is my birthday?"

"You don't say! A thousand congratulations! May you live a hundred years more!"

Rosenheim shook his head sadly. "I don't feel at all well. I eat too much. The doctor says the more I eat the sooner I die."

Fishlovitz gazed abstractedly at the wall.

"I need a new hat," said Rosenheim. "I wear number seven. Well, good-night. I will see you to-morrow."

He found Rosnofsky sitting with his feet in a tub of hot water. "Poor, dear Rosnofsky, I am so sorry to see you sick. I have come to spend the evening with you, and after supper I will read to you if you like."

Rosnofsky's brow became corrugated. "I am not eating supper to-night," he said. "Only milk, the doctor says. Besides, I'm going to bed right away."

Rosenheim sighed. "Did you know that to-morrow is my birthday?"

"No, I didn't know it. I'm glad. Hope you have many more."

"Impossible. I drink too much port wine. The doctor says any glass is likely to kill me. I wonder if it is too late to buy a new hat? I wear number seven."

"Oh, I guess you will find some store open; and if not you can get one in the morning."

Rosenheim went into his printing-office and opened his safe. From it he drew the type of the blank will and printed half a dozen copies. Then he chuckled and went out and paid for his own supper.



WHEN ROSENHEIM HAD DEPARTED HER FIRST QUESTION WAS, "DO YOU THINK HE WILL LIVE LONG?"

On the following day Cohen, the tailor, the fat old fellow with the long gray beard, who in those days owned a dozen carts in the Hester Street mart, had come home at noon, as was his custom, for his dinner. Cohen lived well; the table-cloth was almost hidden under the dishes of appetizing things that filled the air with savory odors. The first mouthful had hardly touched his lips when there came a gentle tap upon the door, and Rosenheim entered.

"Peace be with you!" he exclaimed.

"And with you peace!" replied Cohen. "Step into the parlor. I will be through with my dinner in a few minutes."

Rosenheim's eyes took in the appetizing array in one glance. "I will not disturb

you," he said. "I only came to show you something. I have just made my will, and it might interest you to read the name of one of the people who will get something when I die. I do not think I will live long."

Cohen wiped his mouth upon his sleeve, adjusted his spectacles, and then turned red. "Me?" he exclaimed. "All except one house to me?"

"Sure!" said Rosenheim.

"Why not? Do you remember how one day you gave me a fine ten-cent cigar for nothing? I never forget a kindness. Only one thing I ask. You must swear never to tell anybody. My other friends would be so jealous!"

"Oh, never, never would I open my mouth!" cried Cohen. "But forgive me such terrible impoliteness. I have not asked you to sit down and eat. Have you had your dinner?"

"No. I didn't even feel hungry until I saw you eat; but your happy face has given me a fine appetite." And Rosenheim proceeded to do justice to the best meal he had eaten in years. Before he had finished he began to regret the time he had wasted upon Rosnofsky and Fishlovitz. Cohen was a legatee after his own heart. Such meals were

rare in the Ghetto.

"I see you leave a house to Gordon," remarked Cohen. "Which Gordon is that?"

"The wine-dealer. Once I went to him to get a pint of port wine, and he didn't have a pint bottle but gave me a quart for the same price. Such a kindness I never forget."

"The old miser!" thought Cohen. But, aloud: "You surely have a fine heart, Rosenheim. Did you ever hear my daughter play on the piano? No? Come around to-night, and you will hear some fine music. Will you come?"

"Sure I will. At what hour do you eat?"

"Seven o'clock. But if you come at six maybe we find a little bottle that mama

Bruno Lessing

doesn't know anything about, before supper. Hey, mama?"

Mrs. Cohen, whose sparkling eyes betrayed the visions of wealth that filled her mind, smiled amiably. When Rosenheim had departed her first question was,

"Do you think he will live long?"

"Who can tell? He is much older than I, but may outlive us all. I heard him say the other day that he loved good eating, but the more he ate the worse he felt. And he loves port wine, but his doctor told him it would kill him. So I guess he doesn't lose much by being so stingy. Get a good supper to-night. Have we any port wine in the house?"

"Oh, husband!" exclaimed Mrs. Cohen, in horror. There was no port wine in the house, but she sent for some.

Cohen lasted nearly six months before the growing healthiness of Rosenheim made him despair. Gordon lasted nearly a year, but then Gordon only sent him an occasional bottle of wine.

In the next will Abrahams, the grocer, and Markstein, the real-estate agent, were the legatees. They lasted quite a long time—I have forgotten how long. After them came others—for nearly five years.

Each was sworn to secrecy. Each showed his appreciation of Rosenheim's generosity by heaping meals, gifts, and kindnesses upon him. Each selected some relative or close friend to be one of the executors of the will. And all, in turn, eventually despaired of Rosenheim ever dying.

But, alas! we all must die, and Rosenheim's mortal career ended suddenly, unexpectedly, and painlessly. During his sleep, one night, his heart quietly ceased beating, and Rosenheim was gathered into the bosom of Abraham.

The synagogue was filled with mourners, eager, nervous, dry-eyed mourners, nearly all of whom carried in their pockets notes that they had received from a lawyer they had never heard of before, asking them to come to Rosenheim's printing-establishment after the services.

The appointed hour was three o'clock. At one second past three the little printing-shop was jammed. A sharp-faced, elderly man, whose face never relaxed a single muscle but whose eyes seemed to twinkle a great deal, came forward with a document in his hand.

"My name, gentlemen, is John Stewart. I was for many years the late Mr. Rosenheim's legal adviser, at least in so far as his financial affairs were concerned. He sent me his will, which I have here, only three days before his death. From time to time he sent me the names of his friends whom he wanted to be present when his will was read, which accounts for the request you received to be here to-day. As a matter of fact"—Mr. Stewart's twinkling eyes peered over the edge of his glasses and slowly took in the whole room—"as a matter of fact, Mr. Rosenheim had a curious habit of sending me a will every two, three, or four months, always asking that the last one be destroyed. The wills, however, were all alike. They read exactly like the one I have here, which I shall now read."

The stillness in the room was deathly.

"The house in Rivington Street and my printing-business I leave to David Brandes, with my blessing. Tell him not to spend his money foolishly. All the rest of my property I leave to the Jewish Charitable Society to use as they think best. The president of the society, Mr. John Stewart, and David Brandes are to be the executors, without pay."

For the space of nearly a minute the stillness continued. No one moved. The lawyer's audience sat, as if spellbound, gazing into vacancy, thinking, thinking. Then Rosnofsky heaved a long sigh and arose. That broke the spell, and in a few seconds the room was deserted. The men went off in as many different directions as they could find, silent, uncommunicative. They had no clear idea as to where they were going. Each wanted to be alone. Each wanted to think.

The next day Rosnofsky and Fishlovitz talked the matter over. They had waited the longest. They had not the faintest suspicion of the existence of other legatees; they could think of nothing but their own feelings. They discussed the matter with utmost calmness. With utmost calmness they damned the late Rosenheim through all eternity. They cursed his treacherous heart and his treacherous lungs and his treacherous liver. They cursed every treacherous hair upon his treacherous head. They cursed each treacherous finger of his treacherous hands and each treacherous toe of his treacherous feet.

"Never was heard such a terrible curse!"

Rosh Hashana came and the holy week, and the spirit of Rosnofsky grew troubled. For nearly a year he had harbored the deadliest enmity toward the departed Rosenheim, and now the day of atonement was near, the day of days when no man can atone for his sins so long as his heart holds resentment against a single soul, living or dead. Rosnofsky laid the matter before the rabbi.

"The matter is very simple," declared the rabbi. "On the day before Yom Kippur you must go to the grave of the departed and beg his forgiveness."

Rosnofsky went home with a lightened heart. He was eager to atone for the terrible curses he had pronounced against the dead man, and the rabbi's method was conveniently simple. On the appointed day he started for the little cemetery where they had buried Rosenheim. On the way he met Fishlovitz.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the cemetery," replied Fishlovitz. "I have no enmity against Rosenheim's memory. I ask his forgiveness to-day."

They journeyed together. As they entered the cemetery they met Gordon, the wine-dealer, coming out. He bowed to them, coldly, and they passed without saying a word. As they neared the grave they came face to face with Cohen, the tailor, the fat old fellow with the long gray beard, and he grinned at them. They looked at each other. As they passed Cohen they heard him chuckle softly. When they came to the grave they found quite a crowd gathered there. All who had been invited to hear the reading of the will were there, but they were not conversing with one another. Occasionally an eye would be raised furtively, but the moment it met another eye, both would be instantly lowered. Suddenly a great light dawned upon Rosnofsky.

"Fishlovitz!" he whispered.

"What is it?" whispered Fishlovitz.

"Rosenheim was a smart man!"

Then they looked at each other and grinned.



SUDDENLY A GREAT LIGHT DAWNED UPON ROSNOFSKY