

A BUSINESSMAN

“In this country one doesn’t have to worry about losing one’s head,” Mosh said to his wife as they unpacked some merchandise in the back of the store. “After all, it’s 1909, times have changed.”

“So it’s 1909 – big deal, you’ve still got to be practical,” she said.

“I, not practical?”

“You’ve just got to be careful, Moshe.”

He drew himself up. “I’m not?”

The bell rang a customer who wore a widebrimmed hat walked in. his boots clicked on Mosh’s new wooden floor.

Minicha came out from the back, tying a red scarf over her head; she stood behind the counter with Mosh. They were both the same height. Mosh pretended no to notice the man’s spurs but was certain his new floor would be ruined by them. He guessed the man must be a policeman – after all, who knew? If policeman wore boots like this he mustn’t say anything.

“What can I get for you?” Mosh asked.

The man was looking at a sign in Hebrew letters Mosh had displayed over a barrel. He looked, picked up a matzoh and sniffed it.

“Soup crackers,” he drawled.

“What’s he saying?” Minicha asked.

“He uses matzoh for soup.”

She gave Mosh an inquiring look. He looked at his wife, shrugging his shoulders.

The man pulled his hat low over his eyes, clearing his throat loudly.

Mosh remembered that he’d forgotten spittoons. His nose curled up slightly as he watched the man walk about his small store after his raucous throat clearing.

“I’m new in town,” the man suddenly said. “My name’s Bob Smith.”

“Ah – good day, Mr. Bob Smith,” said Mosh. Minicha smiled without understanding their exchange.

“I’m from territory west,” Bob continued. “We drive the cattle here into Chicago. You know, I can’t stand cities though.”

Mosh stopped nodding his head. He wasn’t certain if he’d understood all the man’s words. “I’m Moshe. This is my wife Minicha. We’re new here, my store’s two months old.”

“Well,” smiled Bob, hitting Mosh on his back in a friendly manner, “always a chance here for a man to make good.” He glanced furtively at Minicha. “You don’t know where a man can find a woman, do you?”

Mosh understood well enough this time. “Two streets over,” he smiled.

“I’ll come back for those soup crackers,” the man said, his spurs clicking as he left the store.

Mosh glanced at his wife and walked to the back of the store. She followed.

“Mosh!” a voice rang out. “Mosh, we need your help.” A man stuck his head in the doorway. “Mosh!”

The same muddle as always! The street was unpaved, the street Moshe had the genius to’ve bought his shop on, and when it rained, as it had this entire spring, the street turned into a morass. And Mosh volunteered every time to help because they were mostly his countrymen in dairy wagons or in ice wagons that mired themselves and he considered it the only right thing to do. Which didn’t mean that Minicha agreed with him – no, she told him, “Go, be an idiot with the rest of them, my businessman! My brilliant husband says, ‘Let’s buy property here.’ With the few savings we brought over – for what, so he should push wagons out of muck?”

He waved his hand at her and stepped outside.

Half the mild wagon of a friend of his, Krechman, was sunk half-wheel deep in mud. The horse had already been led away. Krechman stared at the beige mud around the vehicle; his milk had spilled and colored it.

Some Poles stood nearby, laughing at a Jew’s sunken milk wagon. They lived the next street over. Eventually three of them ambled over, exchanged greetings, were promised a can of milk each for their efforts if they helped, and spit into their hands to begin. With Krechman and Mosh’s help they pulled the wagon loose from the morass.

Some of their trousers were muddied to the knees as the sauntered away good-naturedly, milk cans in hand.

When Mosh returned, his beard flecked with dried mud and clothes slightly dampened from sweat, his wife's only words were, "Off with the clothes!"

Mosh asked for a towel, telling his wife he would go to the baths. He walked out to the back however, to go to his friend Nathan's next door.

Nathan opened his screen door, chuckling, seeing the state Mosh was in. He sat him down at his table and poured out a glass of holiday wine.

He poured something a bit more potent after they'd finished their glass in silence, proposing a toast. They toasted again, drinking to each other's health, knocking on the wooden tabletop.

"To my mother!"

"To the life here!"

They began drinking to their respective fathers and grandfathers. Tears started in their eyes.

"My family," Mosh sighed. He gazed steadily at Nathan. "And my wife's brother is coming, who thinks I'm nothing but a peasant."

"Don't tell me," Nathan cautioned, holding up his glass. "A toast to the very room we sit in, may it not collapse on our heads tonight!" Mosh raised his glass and drank.

"God created mud, yes?" he asked Nathan.

"God," his friend assented.

"I've got to take matters into my hands." He swayed as he stood up. "Let's be practical ..."

They walked outside, arm in arm, and entered Mosh's store. They took empty crates, tore them apart and hammered the boards together until they had made two signboards. Nathan found paint and, in a primitive manner, began painting letters on them. He asked Mosh twice for the correct spelling of a word. When they had dried both men placed the signs at opposite ends of the street. Their drinking continued through the night.

Mosh's wife had to open the store in the morning.

By mid-morning a policeman had entered the store, asking for Mosh. Mosh heard his name called and woke blearily, still in his dirty clothes, he'd been lying on a couch in the back.

"I want to congratulate you," the policeman said to the startled storekeeper. "We've been trying to stop traffic down this street for months. Every spring it rains," he said, "and we spend half our time digging carts and wagons out of the mud." He shook Mosh's limp hand. "We've put up sidewalks so people can get to your store."

After he had left, Mosh confessed he'd expected to be taken away for this – but to be congratulated? Not to go to Siberia or its equivalent here?

"What a land!" he said, looking at his wife. "Now can you doubt that we did the right thing?"

Customers began visiting. The sidewalks were made of boards: when it rained they shone brown, with a strong woody smell, and the mud could have been an ocean away – no more wagons or lame horses to pull out of the mire!

One day, as Nathan sat with Mosh in his store one hot summer afternoon, a group of strange-looking people carrying straw baskets and wicker suitcases appeared on the porch. A dog was barking at them. Nathan squinted his eyes, just before the group walked through the doorway he swore they looked to him like countrymen of theirs.

"Eli!" Minicha ran to the door, embracing her brother, pressing his face to hers. Everyone began talking at once. In brother and sister's eyes there were tears. "How did you find us?" she asked.

He smiled wryly. "Who else but my brother-in-law would put up signs reading 'Road to a Bottomless Pit – Use Sidewalk to Reach Us! Signed, Mosh's Grocery?'" He turned to his brother-in-law. "You're making money, Mosh?"

"Money? I'll be rich soon!"

"Ah, but a poor man like myself is always poor wherever he goes, Mosh. I've read your letters, I know what you want to tell me ..."

"It's not like Russia, Eli, may it be cursed," Mosh said.

Tea was poured from the samovar. Eli looked admiringly at it and asked Minicha if she remembered how many times their mother had poured tea from the same one, punctuating his question with a loud sigh.

After some tea the wives went to help prepare the meal. The two relatives by marriage sat with each other in silence after Nathan had excused himself to help the ladies.

“Let the children go out and play,” Mosh suggested.

“It’s okay?” asked Eli.

He looked skeptically at Mosh. “Children, go outside,” he said.

Mosh shifted in his seat, clearing his throat. “Eli ...” he hesitated. “Well Eli, Minnie and I have talked about it: we want you to go into business with us, a partnership. We only have this store now, sure, but there’s a future here – we open one, then another, you understand?”

“One can make plans here?”

Mosh hit his fist on the table, “I guarantee it!”

The men continued talking till dusk. Candles were lit and the children are called inside. Dinner was almost ready and wine was poured for the two brothers-in-law.

Food was brought out in steaming plateful, a family feast. Tea was poured and soup ladled out. When everyone finally sat down at the table, after Mosh had asked his wife several times to be seated after she’d jumped up the excuse of having forgotten something else she needed for the meal, Mosh proposed a toast. His eyes glistened like the crystal glass he held on the air, half-filled with purple wine.

“A toast to you all ... my family,” he held the glass still higher. “Everything’s possible if one’s practical!” Swinging his arm after the first word, he tipped over a candle, which landed on a pillow filled with straw lying nearby. It caught on fire. Mosh, thinking quickly, threw soup and tea onto it. Everyone was bellowing at once. “The meal’s been reduced, true, true, but a disaster’s been prevented,” he philosophized, his voice raised above the bedlam, looking at those lamenting the loss of extra soup. “Am I not a practical man?”