

given up all those generous customs since you left your town. Don't practise them now, I expect."

"No one who has lived in Yom," said Crosby fervently, "and remembers its green hills covered with apricot and almond trees, and the cold water that rushes down like a caress from the upland snows and dashes under the little wooden bridges, no one who remembers these things and treasures the memory of them would ever give up a single one of its unwritten laws and customs. To me they are as binding as though I still lived in that hallowed home of my youth."

"Then if I was to ask you for a small loan --" began the greybeard fawningly, edging nearer on the seat and hurriedly wondering how large he might safely make his request, "if I was to ask you for, say --"

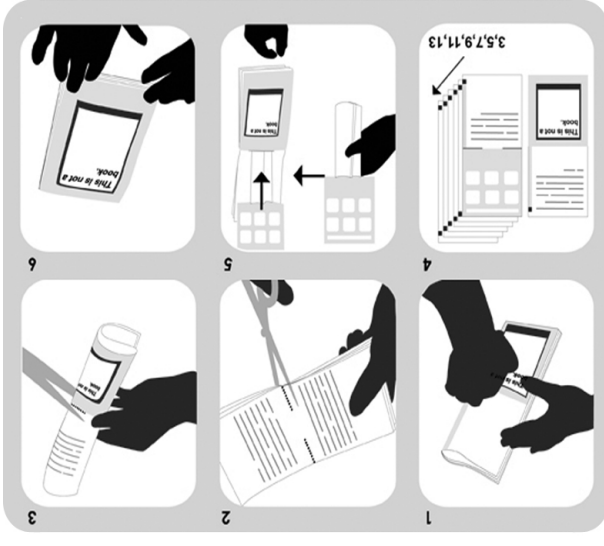
"At any other time, certainly," said Crosby; "in the months of November and December, however, it is absolutely forbidden for anyone of our race to give or receive loans or gifts; in fact, one does not willingly speak of them. It is considered unlucky. We will therefore close this discussion."

The Romancers

Saki (H H Munro)

"In Yom," said Crosby, "it is not necessary to have friends in order to obtain help. Any citizen of Yom would help a stranger as a matter of course. The greybeard was now genuinely interested. The conversation had at last taken a favourable turn. "If someone, like me, for instance, who was in undeserved difficulties, asked a citizen of that town you speak of for a small loan to tide over a few days' imppecuniosity, or perhaps a rather larger sum -- would it be given to him as a matter of course?" "There would be a certain preliminary," said Crosby; "one would take him to a wine-shop and treat him to a measure of wine, and then, after a little high-flown conversation, one would put the desired sum in his hand and wish him good-day. It is a roundabout way of performing a simple transaction, but in the East all ways are roundabout." The listener's eyes were glittering. "Ah," he exclaimed, with a thin sneering grin, "I suppose you've

It was autumn in London, that blessed season between the harshness of winter and the insouciance of summer; a trustful season when one buys bulbs and sees to the registration of one's vote, believing perpetually in spring and a change of Government. Morton Crosby sat on a bench in a secluded corner of Hyde Park, lazily enjoying a cigarette and watching the slow grazing promenade of a pair of snow-geese, the male looking rather like an albino edition of the russet-hued female. Out of the corner of his eye Crosby also noted with some interest the hesitating hoverings of a human figure, which had passed and repassed his seat two or three times at shortening intervals, like a wary crow about to alight near some possibly edible morsel. Inevitably the figure came to an anchorage on the bench, within easy talking distance of its original occupant. The uncared-for clothes, the aggressive, grizzled beard, and the furtive, evasive eye of the new-comer bespoke the professional cadger, the man who would undergo hours of humiliating tale-spinning and rebuff rather than adventure on half a day's decent work.



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For a while the new-comer fixed his eyes straight in front of him in a strenuous, unseeing gaze; then his voice broke out with the insinuating inflection of one who has a story to retail well worth any loiterer's while to listen to.

"It's a strange world," he said.

As the statement met with no response he altered it to the form of a question.

"I daresay you've found it to be a strange world, mister?"

"As far as I am concerned," said Crosby, "the strangeness has worn off in the course of thirty-six years."

"Ah," said the greybeard, "I could tell you things that you'd hardly believe. Marvellous things that have really happened to me."

"Nowadays there is no demand for marvellous things that have really happened," said Crosby discouragingly; "the professional writers of fiction turn these things out so much better. For instance, my neighbours tell me wonderful, incredible things that their Aberdeens and chows and borzois have done; I never listen to them. On the other hand, I have read 'The Hound of the

Baskerville's' three times."
The greybeard moved uneasily in his seat; then he opened up new country.
"I take it that you are a professing Christian," he observed.
"I am a prominent and I think I may say an influential member of the Mussulman community of Eastern Persia," said Crosby, making an excursion himself into the realms of fiction.
The greybeard was obviously disconcerted at this new check to introductory conversation, but the defeat was only momentary.
"Persia. I should never have taken you for a Persian," he remarked, with a somewhat aggrieved air.
"I am not," said Crosby; "my father was an Afghan."
"An Afghani!" said the other, smitten into bewildered silence for a moment. Then he recovered himself and renewed his attack.
"Afghanistan. Ah! We've had some wars with that country; now, I daresay, instead of fighting it we might have learned something from it. A very

wealthy country, I believe. No real poverty there."

He raised his voice on the word "poverty" with a suggestion of intense feeling. Crosby saw the opening and avoided it.

"It possesses, nevertheless, a number of highly talented and ingenious beggars," he said; "if I had not spoken so disparagingly of marvellous things that have really happened I would tell you the story of Ibrahim and the eleven camel-loads of blotting-paper. Also I have forgotten exactly how it ended."

"My own life-story is a curious one," said the stranger, apparently stifling all desire to hear the history of Ibrahim; "I was not always as you see me now."

"We are supposed to undergo complete change in the course of every seven years," said Crosby, as an explanation of the foregoing announcement.

"I mean I was not always in such distressing circumstances as I am at present," pursued the stranger doggedly.

"That sounds rather rude," said Crosby stiffly, "considering that you are at present talking to a man reputed to be one of the most gifted

conversationalists of the Afghan border."

"I don't mean in that way," said the greybeard hastily; "I've been very much interested in your conversation. I was alluding to my unfortunate financial situation. You mayn't hardly believe it, but at the present moment I am absolutely without a farthing. Don't see any prospect of getting any money, either, for the next few days. I don't suppose you've ever found yourself in such a position," he added.

"In the town of Yom," said Crosby, "which is in Southern Afghanistan, and which also happens to be my birthplace, there was a Chinese philosopher who used to say that one of the three chiefest human blessings was to be absolutely without money. I forget what the other two were."

"Ah, I daresay," said the stranger, in a tone that betrayed no enthusiasm for the philosopher's memory; "and did he practise what he preached? That's the test."

"He lived happily with very little money or resources," said Crosby.

"Then I expect he had friends who would help him liberally whenever he was in difficulties, such as I

"But it is still October!" exclaimed the adventurer with an eager, angry whine, as Crosby rose from his seat; "wants eight days to the end of the month!"

"The Afghan November began yesterday," said Crosby severely, and in another moment he was striding across the Park, leaving his recent companion scowling and muttering furiously on the seat.

"I don't believe a word of his story," he chattered to himself; "pack of nasty lies from beginning to end. Wish I'd told him so to his face. Calling himself an Afghani!"

The snorts and snarls that escaped from him for the next quarter of an hour went far to support the truth of the old saying that two of a trade never agree.

Transcribed from the 1914 John Lane, The Bodley Head edition by David Price,
ccx074@coventry.ac.uk
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