

# RED-HOT SELLING

BY WILLIAM WEIMAR

TIME was, in the idyllic days of our forefathers, when any fellow of grade-school erudition, free of halitosis, a cleft palate and religious doubt, might look forward in simple faith to a successful career as a salesman, or as the term then was, a drummer. Given a mileage book and a case of samples, he was admonished only to plug everlastingly at it. If he did so he was sure to win through eventually to an honored place in the home office and a competence ample for his simple needs. So all the Babbitts of 1885 were made; so they got their high blood-pressure.

But not today, in the merciless shambles of modern commercial strife. Successful selling, one learns from even a brief reading of the prophets, is now become a mysterious business, comparable to lion-taming or self-induced catalepsy. The Prospect, the buyer, is viewed no longer merely as a man with whom business may conceivably be done: he is instead treated as a laboratory animal on which an operation—and a peculiarly delicate operation—is to be performed. Worse, the victim is found, not strapped conveniently on the table, but free and snarling defiance from behind the slop jars of the operating theatre. Trickery therefore becomes necessary: the beast must be lured to its doom; and psychology, by the unanimous vote of scientists, is the bait. "Selling is psychological—it exists under the hair." The quotation is from "Selling Slants," by George F. Abbott, a name that, recalling the realtor of Zenith, I hail as almost too good to be true.

But true or not, Br'er Abbott states the

*leitmotif* with all the glory of the full brass choir, and then at once, directing the blast upon the trembling novice, imparts the ultimate secret of success:

He should firmly believe in himself, he should believe he is a big man. If he believes this, he is going to TALK BIG—ACT BIG—and in consequence sooner or later, his results WILL BE BIG.

He should go through a course of self-hypnotism so far as business is concerned, and in this manner he will rid himself of one of the devils in this business—FEAR.

Under the title, *Salesmanship*, the New York Public Library lists 300 books, including a collection of character-building letters written by ten successful salesmen to salesmen who had not been doing very well. There are also "Come; Let Us Walk Together," a series of inspirational editorials from the *Sporting Goods Salesman* and other periodicals, and tomes on such subtle aspects as the Approach, the Delineation or Exposition and the all-important Close.

Herr Freud and his school, emerged at length from below Twelfth street, are now taken up, threadbare though they be, by the medicine men of trade; and the newsstands cater to popular demand by displaying alongside such salesmen's staples as *Art Lover*, *Paris Nights*, *Arts*, *Fads*, *Modes*, and similar æsthetic works, that great organ of enlightenment, *Psychology*. In a recent issue of this inspiring monthly one finds, among numberless advertisements of will power builders and keys to hypnotism, a long moan for the passing of M. Coué, "A Straight Talk on the Cardinal Principles of Salesmanship—as Applied to Business, Marriage, the Professions—and LIFE," "What Is Somno-Ther-

apy?" "Some Facts About the Thyroid Gland," "The Psychology of Passion," with photographs of the choruses of "Great Temptations" and "Passions of 1926," and "Psychology in the News."

Imagine the ex-shipping clerk, fed on such manna, fixing a steely eye on a contumacious Prospect and playing on the fellow's fears, passions and cravings for gain! God save me, I tried it myself in a day gone by. Full of hope, at the close of the late unpleasantness, I abandoned my youthful body and brain to a study of the science in all its ramifications, including mesmerism and ghost dances. It was a long, hard struggle, but a time came at length when I went forth, the very apotheosis of the peddler. The way had been prepared; the firm whose goods I carried into the bleak tundras of New England was known, although it had, during the war, devoted itself almost exclusively to wholesale transactions. Furthermore, once upon the road, I found the boss had spoken in truth: the stock actually was more extensive than my competitors'; moreover, our prices were right, and business flourished in that lush prelude to the doldrums of 1920. I prepared myself for a killing.

But something was wrong. The choice plums went elsewhere, in many cases to such of my rivals as I definitely knew could offer neither our assortments nor our quotations. In despair I reviewed my technique. Plainly I had not profited from my studies to the extent that I had hoped and believed. And so, from Hartford to Framingham, I gave my nights to theory and my days to putting that theory into practice. But in vain. At the Lenox, in Boston, a telegram implored me in the name of God to return to New York. Feeling sure that the end of things was at hand, I obeyed, only to find that the boss, though he broke out no old brandy to celebrate the homecoming, intended to retain my services for a go at the territory around New York. Pleased at the prospect, I gave myself to a further scrutiny of the texts and forays upon the trade.

## II

On a sultry afternoon that made of Long Island City a sweltering grotto, I paid my respects to a small, wattled member of a race that a few months before had been the target for Allied high explosives and the verbal assaults of the Great Moral Denunciator in Washington. No, he was positively not in the market. No! But my name interested him: I had come perhaps out of Thuringia? Not so far as I knew. Nuremberg was most often spoken of at home. Nuremberg! Der hell you say! And I was treated to the performance of a high pressure American booster doing his stuff in a make-up and dialogue reminiscent of Fourteenth street burlesque. Old post cards came from dusty pigeonholes. *Fleischbrücke zu Nürnberg, Frauentor zu Nürnberg, Am Tiergärtnerort zu Nürnberg.*

"And the *Lebkuchen*"! I interposed. "We have not had any since 1913."

*Lieber Gott, the Lebkuchen!* He was crying now, and I thought best to change the subject. What an afternoon for a *Seidel* of that Kulmbacher taken from us by the children of light!

Instantly he flamed into righteous anger. Together we denounced such a *Schweineerei*, and from Prohibition to the Fourteen Points was a transition logical enough. The long afternoon waned. It was time I was in the office, reporting another fruitless day. To linger here was a waste of time so far as business was concerned. The boss, I recalled, held grave doubts as to the possibility of anyone wooing this fat account from the house that had retained it for years. And I had not had opportunity to so much as mention my goods. There was little nourishment in merely listening politely while an old man wistfully spoke of a Fatherland that existed only in his golden memories. The last funeral cortege, returning dust-covered from Calvary, vanished into the sunset behind the Bridge. I rose to pack my stock. Then, of a sudden, came the sweet words:

"How much you're asking for those?"

At 5.30, bearing an order that Herr Krausmeyer, his stenographers gone for the day, had written out in his own angular script, I sat in a B. M. T. train, figuring the commission. One hundred and fifty-six dollars and eleven cents. And I had not, for so much as a single instant, cast upon him the Evil Eye nor attempted even my most elementary exorcisms. Business had been done, and a very fair day's business, merely because I had remembered the embossed tin boxes that contained certain cakes suitable only for use as missiles in some deplorable *Weihnachts* affray. A strange basis, I thought, for a commercial transaction of some importance with a fellow reputed a very hard-headed business man!

Pondering the subject on the way home, I began to doubt the Black Magic on which so much stress was laid. I recalled the significant impatience with which the boss had always dismissed my attempts to go deeply into the more technical aspects of our line: invariably the conversation, by transitions hardly apposite, was turned to art. The neophyte, *couchant* at the feet of the successful trader and bent on complete knowledge of his craft, was vouchsafed no more than a repetition of elements ere the master escaped by a headlong dive into Impressionism. Once he had found that I knew the Barbizon School to be something other than an institution for teaching languages through the use of phonograph records, he bestowed the kiss and, despite my failure to garner profits in the two months of my labors, saw to it that my salary went on and even was slightly raised. Together we visited the Metropolitan and other galleries, and once, with doors barricaded against the Philistines in the outer offices, we attempted charcoal sketches of our tall and austere neighbor, the Bush Building.

It was a queer proceeding and one hardly calculated to raise the morale of the sales force. That such things went on in the hard and merciless world of business was shocking to my ideals. Did the boss see in

me great possibilities as a future reaper in the fields? Did he believe, because I had heard of Monet and could make a stab at pronouncing the name of Cézanne, that such glittering erudition would beguile prospects into surrendering their accounts? It seemed incredible, yet there was in the advertisements of many culture courses impressive testimony for the confusion of such as might scoff at the idea. Perhaps he suspected that I gave my every spare twenty minutes to a perusal of gems of the world's wisdom and whole evenings to the Five Foot Shelf. Perhaps he merely found in our talks momentary escape from the intolerable boredom of his business life—and was willing to pay for such means of escaping. I do not know.

But after the pleasant adventure on Long Island there began to glow about the matters of cold and sober commerce a genial light revealing a multitude of details, bizarre and rich in amusement. I perceived that, other things being by no means equal, orders went to the fellow who could most persuasively share with the buyer a compelling interest in horse-shoe pitching, zoömorphism or the breeding of Lady Amherst pheasants. Business then, like all life, swarmed with desires for refuge, for a little glitter to relieve the dreadful monotony of the drudge.

Well, it was assuredly a matter to keep in mind. That evening with appropriate ceremonies I burned the gospels, and thereafter harried the metropolitan trade with heartening results. The experience led to an emphatic conclusion: the hawker of wares is best advised to foreswear all attempts at psychic control. Let him rather collect for future use a store of miscellaneous information, not necessarily true, for he will deal with men susceptible to the traditional fallacies, men to whom a brand-new idea may seem so disturbing that a retreat into cold, shocked silence will be their inevitable reaction. For myself, once I had abjured the rôle of amateur swami, I found business coming my way. I sold because it chanced that I had once

lived in Montreal, because I had been introduced to Alla Nazimova, because as a child, in 1908, I had seen that ball game wherein Merkle failed to touch second. Whenever, indeed, I could strike upon a subject that offered the yawning purchasing gent a moment's respite from his humdrum life of unit costs, the sun of his favor shone upon me and was reflected gloriously upon my goods.

I did business in Worcester because I was the ingenuous boy to a wistful Babbitt with no offspring. In Bridgeport, remembrance that my grandfather had served with Anthony Comstock in the Seventeenth Connecticut Volunteers, put me right with an ardent Frau Lieutenant Colonel of the G. A. R.—and consequently with her husband. In Philadelphia, the tale of Bismarck, the phenomenal police dog, and his master's gloves did the trick. (Incidentally the only instance I can recall where the legendary device of the salesman's questionable story was employed.)

Inevitably, of course, I met specimens directly out of cold storage; fellows seemingly intent only on dollars and cents. One such aloof edelweiss, blooming coldly in Providence, R. I., was interested, I found after almost a year's research, in

mathematical puzzles. Realizing my own hopeless inability to meet the man with his chosen weapons, I compromised by mailing to him a mass of brain-searing problems. A month later I found him haggard, almost insane, but yet strong enough to repulse my advances. Six months of siege laid at long distance brought capitulation: he purchased, paying with many an ugly curse a little more for grades of material that shortly afterward brought him to my throat with the accusation that I had, for some strange reason or other, wilfully kept him from buying such goods sooner. . . .

### III

Now, retired from active service at the front, I loll in the boss's atelier, and sally forth only when particularly dirty work is to be done. Then the prospect who is also a golfer hears of what was almost an ace on the twelfth at Greenwich; the bug on diet learns that meat may be bolted without actual harm; the advocate of Prohibition for labor gets his two quarts of Dewar's—and not infrequently business is done.

Business? Business! Then I am the Little Father of all the Russias!

# VARIETY

BY HUGH KENT

**A**N AMERICAN newspaper man in Paris was sued for divorce. A tabloid weekly theatrical newspaper, published in New York, and filled with ugly type, heavy black advertisements and the most atrocious English ever put into print, was named as co-respondent by his wife. She said that when the paper arrived every week, her husband did not speak to her during the two days required to read it from cover to cover. The Paris court record shows that the suit was withdrawn on the understanding that the husband should cancel his subscription to the paper. It was *Variety*.

*Variety's* grammar is barbarous; its style is original and unique and completely independent of any other writing; its phraseology is wild and revolutionary and its diction is the result of miscegenation among shop talk, slang, Broadway colloquialisms, sporting neologisms and impatient short-cutting. *Variety's* other name is Sime Silverman, owner, editor, bowels and soul of the sheet. Sime, as he signs himself, and as he is known up and down Broadway, had the usual experiences of the adventurous youth who leaves home before his first shave. He saw a little of everything, playing cards for the house in an up-State gambling joint at seventeen, and finally coming to the big city, where he settled on the alluring outskirts of the theatrical business. About twenty years ago he got a job reporting theatrical news for the *Morning Telegraph*, then the Bible of the showman and the sugar of Broadway's coffee. He and a reporter who knew nothing about Broadway went to work the same day. The managing editor con-

ceived the idea of pitting the newcomers against each other, keeping the better one and discharging the other. Sime countered by pooling his stories with the other fellow and so they always managed to break even on honors. But it did not last long, for he was soon fired.

He took his new reporter friend with him, borrowed \$2500 and started *Variety*. He was bankrupt at the end of the first week, and at the end of every other week for months, but he kept on borrowing and scraping until finally the property began to breathe. He staked its claim to existence on printing all the facts about the show world, and, because he has never varied from that programme, he still has to borrow and scrape. He has been in battles that lasted for years—with the Shuberts, with the B. F. Keith vaudeville interests, and with other powerful foes. There is peace for a space, and then comes a time when Sime must choose between suppressing what he regards as news, and doing battle. Invariably the choice is battle. At present he is fighting both the Shuberts and the Keith-Albee vaudeville. He has waged an almost endless fight against all the big theatrical interests, not to reform anybody, for he is not an up-lifter, but simply to preserve his editorial independence. He doesn't like it because it costs him lots of money and time, but the only way he knows how to run a paper is to have it completely free—a novelty in theatrical journalism. His advertisers pay for every agate line they get and they are never given puffs as *lagniappe*. An advertiser may take a page to give a message to the trade, and in the same issue,