

PROFILES

SPECIALTIES

III—EXPENSIVE CHEERFULNESS PLUS

IN 1926, Henry Blackman Sell, now the president of Sell's Specialties, Inc., a firm that puts out a line of de-luxe canned-meat products, resigned the editorship of *Harper's Bazaar*, which he had held since 1920. This was in keeping with his policy of leaving a job when he had become a big success in it. Soon afterward, the Butterick Publishing Company—*Delinicator*, *Adventure Magazine*, and *Everybody's*—offered Sell a job as a kind of boss editor for the chain. He took it, but he spent only about half of his time at it. The rest he devoted to the Blaker Advertising Agency, a small but prosperous firm that he soon purchased from the founder and made larger and more prosperous. He got some of his business—he had a few public-relations, as well as advertising, accounts—through acquaintanceships he had struck up while he was on *Harper's Bazaar*. Among them were Hattie Carnegie, the International Silk Guild, Delman Shoes, the United Piece Dye Works, the Waldorf, Louis Sherry's, Elizabeth Arden, and Lucien Lelong. He also acquired the accounts of the American Radiator Company, Kewanee Boilers, the Standard Sanitary Corporation, the Standard Casket Company, and the Church Seat Company. Sell still owns the Blaker Agency, but he gives only a fraction of his time to it, because meat keeps him so busy. He continues to do some notable things in advertising—for example, he has done a lot of work on the campaign for CARE, the European relief agency—but his reputation in this business is based mainly on past glories. The famous slogan of the Church Seat Company, "The Best Seat in the House," is his. The idea of the Du Barry Success School came out of his office. He was the father of vitamin advertising. He was also the discoverer of one of the most familiar figures in American advertising, the hooded, wraithlike girl with the saintly pallor who appears in the Elizabeth Arden ads. He saw her in a Paris couturier's one day, and he instantly realized what she could mean to mud packs and muscle oil.

Sell had a fine time during the depression. His business went to smash and he lost most of his savings, but he

downed more champagne cocktails and more lobsters between 1930 and 1934 than in any other four-year period before or since. "I was lucky," he says. "I sat it out in Peacock Alley. I rode out the storm on the Monarch of Bermuda." He was a fairly big stockholder in Simmons Beds, which some customers' man had led him to believe would hold up forever. Simmons Beds began to buckle early on Wednesday, October 23, 1929, six days before the following Tuesday's climax, on which day they collapsed. Sell's agency quickly felt the effects of the market break, too. One morning he went to his office and found cancellation orders on two million dollars' worth of business in the mail. "Even the casket business went to pieces," he says. "Lord knows how people got buried." Eventually, Sell had nothing to do but sit around thinking in night clubs and restaurants. This was a pleasant mode of existence, but in 1930 and 1931 it was a lonely one. The sound of Sell calling a waiter echoed like the voice of a hunter in a canyon. Sell loves people, and he finds satisfaction in seeing them have a good time, particularly if the good time costs a lot of money. He believes that what he calls "expensive cheerfulness" is one of the foundations of Western civilization. He approves Henry Wallace's goal of a glass of milk for every Hottentot, and has recently been giving liberally of his time and money to the cause of feeding the hungry in Europe, but he would like to see the goal amended to include a champagne cocktail and a lobster for every Hottentot.

Sitting alone in the Oval Room of the Ritz one evening, Sell was seized with an idea for reviving the festive spirit. He had seen several people walk to the entrance, survey the empty tables, lower their eyes, shake their heads in the forlorn and sorrowing manner of a man looking upon the bier of a friend, and move on. His experience with the food and entertainment industries (he had been one of William Randolph Hearst's official party-givers) had taught him that success begets success, that there is no more effective stimulus to enjoyment than the sight of other people enjoying themselves. A restaurant may employ a



Henry Blackman Sell

chef with as many blue ribbons as My Own Brucie, but people won't have confidence in it unless they see other people eating there. It occurred to Sell that if the people who slouched on after seeing the Oval Room empty had seen it half full of people having a good time, some of them would have joined in the fun. He decided that what the restaurant business needed was pump-priming. He worked out a New Deal program for hotels and night clubs at least two years before Roosevelt came along with his New Deal for the rest of the country.

From 1930 until 1934, the chief clients of the Blaker Agency were places like Sherry's, the Ritz, the Waldorf, and Bermuda's Castle Harbour. Sell also had the Furness Bermuda Line account. They gave him their money not for advertising, however, but for non-paying stooges. For eating places, Sell supplied diners of experience and finesse. For places with dance floors, he supplied graceful and attractive young people. Perennial travellers, generally with names that would make the papers, were provided for the Furness Bermuda Line boats and Castle Harbour. "We filled up the Waldorf's restaurants with people who didn't have the price of a dinner in Child's, and we had them eat themselves out of shape on crêpes Suzette," he says, recalling his accomplishments with satisfaction, and probably with something less than scientific accuracy. "We had beautiful kids with holes in their shoes dancing all over the Starlight Roof. The place doesn't look half as gay today as it did then,