



"COMMERCIALS" AND THEIR WAYS.

THE kingdom inhabited by Commercial Travellers is so vast, and the dwellers therein so varied in characteristics and extensive in number, that it is difficult to give a general description of their habits and ways of life without being inaccurate or unjust in regard to some particular portion of the community. It is best, perhaps, first to clear the ground of those parasites of the great commercial body—that outer fringe of individuals who, while they certainly seem technically entitled to rank themselves among "commercials," are yet very much at variance with the figure which the term "commercial traveller" usually summons before our imagination. The keen, hungry-looking man, with a black bag, whom you may notice sometimes in the street, looking critically at shop-windows, scanning the fascias for proprietors' names, and peeping through the doors to see if the shop is full, or if there is an opening for business, would call himself a commercial traveller. And the man who is upon you in your office before you have recovered your self-possession, before you are aware of his presence almost, extolling the virtues of some article he wishes you to buy—who is alternately bland and stern, repressive and persuasive, as the occasions of business demand—would, doubtless, lay claim to the title of commercial traveller. Indeed, although we have mentioned here only two types of the genus, the experience of most readers will support the view that these might be sub-divided into a much greater variety. Gas-burners and regulators seem to have been as prolific as anything in producing this particular class of representatives. It is astonishing how many people have found out some new description of gas-burner on entirely new principles, and how eager they are to press samples of their ingenuity on the rest of mankind. And they are so generous and reasonable! You are not required to buy one. Oh, no, only try one; allow him to screw one on now, so that during the next three or four weeks, and previous to your giving him the order for a gross, or half a gross—which he feels sure will follow a trial—you may have an opportunity of seeing how it works. So eager are they to leave samples, that one is almost made to fancy there must be some old Act of Parliament which compels a man who takes a sample of a thing, to buy a large quantity or pay a heavy penalty. These intrusive gentlemen often defeat their own ends. What would the reader think of a scene like this, which is often enacted in commercial life? Imagine yourself in the establishment of Messrs. Somebody, Sons, and Co., the mighty merchants, who employ over two thousand hands, whose name is so good on 'Change that people in the City smile when it is

mentioned, and who pay a ground rent for their premises which would keep half a score of families in comfort. The day's work has commenced; clerks are busy writing; managers are hurrying to and fro. Customers are coming in; goods are going out; all is bustle, life, and activity. And in his inner office sits one of the principals—the head of the firm, Mr. Somebody himself—receiving reports, hearing complaints, deciding difficult business questions—his time worth pounds a minute. For old Father Time has failed to appreciate Mr. Somebody's importance, and has made no special arrangement in his favour, so that he has precisely the same amount of time to get through his day's work as you and I have, reader, to get through ours. Enter, in the midst of the hurry and pressure, a quiet-looking man, with a self-possessed demeanour.

"Can I see Mr. Somebody?" he says, addressing a clerk.

"He is very much engaged just now, sir," is the reply; "would one of our managers—?"

"My business is with Mr. Somebody himself," returns the stranger.

"What name shall I say? Will he know your name? No. Then if he should ask your business?"

"I really cannot tell *you* my business. If Mr. Somebody is to be seen, let me see him; if not—" and the reticent individual shrugs his shoulders, and waves his hand suggestively towards the door.

The uncertain clerk takes in the name to Mr. Somebody, who looks up sternly from a letter he is writing—

"What does he want?"

"I don't know, sir; he objects to state his business to any one but you."

The great man frowns, looks at his watch, and says slowly, "Ask him to step in."

Door opened; stranger invited to step in; clerk retires, and door closed.

"Good morning, sir," says the intruder, bowing politely to Mr. Somebody, as that gentleman gazes at him. "I trust you will excuse the liberty of calling, sir, *but I have something perfectly new in the way of shirt-studs and sleeve-links which—*"

Let us draw a veil over what follows; but is it not obvious that the too intrusive gentleman richly deserved any rebuff he might have received?

Turning now from the class of travellers like these, to the consideration of the commercial traveller proper, what a different prospect meets the view. Have we not all met, at some period of our travelling lives, that calm, unfurried gentleman at the railway station, who is under no anxiety about losing his train, makes the porter carry his extra portmanteau, has the evening paper under his arm, and who takes out a travelling-cap, which he adjusts comfortably as soon as he is settled in the carriage? Have we not all conversed with him, and found how pleasantly he can wile away the tedium of a long journey by his merry chat, his knowledge of men and affairs, his

wide experience of mercantile matters, his pleasant anecdotes and easy manners? Jovial, genial "commercial!" let me thank you here collectively for many a journey lightened, and many a useful hint or anecdote added to my store through your bright but too brief companionship.

Perhaps there are few men in the higher walks of life, as distinguished from manual labour; whose work is more arduous, or requires more knowledge of life, perception of character, and consummate tact than the commercial traveller's. Constantly dealing with strangers, he must nevertheless banish all trace of modesty or "backwardness in coming forward," and yet must be equally careful to avoid anything like impudence, which will infallibly get him a bad name and render his visits unwelcome. Indeed, so much is required, that to be a really good traveller a man should be possessed of natural gifts for it, and that especially where a connection has to be made among retailers. Some men have such a genial small-talk, such an air of sincerity and regard as they inquire after your health, and that of any of your relatives they may happen to know, that orders are given almost insensibly. Far different is the lot of the man who has to travel among consumers—that is, among the public generally—persons who do not sell his goods again, but use them themselves.

Are there not, unfortunately, individuals whose readiness in giving orders is only equalled by their unreadiness in meeting their financial engagements afterwards? What thorns are they in the side of the "commercial," and how carefully must he try, by shrewdness of observation, intelligence of inquiry, and keenness of memory, to steer clear of them! For the house he represents has, in all likelihood, no knowledge of its customer's stability, beyond the confidence the firm has in "our Mr. So-and-so's" discretion, and gloomy would be the looks awaiting Mr. So-and-so if he were to bring a black sheep within the fold of his principal's ledger.

An instance of a well-merited reward for perseverance and courage, was that of a commercial traveller who was expecting a large order from a country tradesman, but arrived in the town on a fête-day. Finding the shop closed he inquired as to the whereabouts of the proprietor, and ascertaining that he was attending the fête, about a mile out of the town, went there after him. When he arrived there a balloon was just going to ascend, and, to his dismay, he saw his man stepping into the car. Plucking up courage, however, he stepped forward and asked to be allowed to ascend. There was room, and he entered the car. In a few moments, away went the balloon; and it was not until the little party was well above the tree-tops, that the enterprising "commercial" turned towards his customer with the first remark of—"And now, sir, what can I do for you in calicoes?" Catching the humour of the position, and not unwilling to

reward such perseverance, the astonished tradesman gave his pursuer as large an order as he could manage, with the excusable proviso that, in future, he should be allowed to take his pleasure in peace, and that on no account was the traveller to mention the circumstance to his brethren of the road.

There are a great many temptations besetting the path of the commercial traveller. Always migrating, he experiences but little of that home influence which goes far to make men steady, and which constitutes such an important feature in our English social life. He must fare as he can in the places he visits, and though we are far from saying that he lacks good living, it is easy to imagine a more comfortable existence than that which hotel life affords. And then he is often a victim of custom. So prone is humanity to fall into grooves, and so arbitrary are the laws of these grooves, that even a shifting, ever-changing class of men like commercial travellers, ever passing and repassing one another on the road, has its unwritten, inexorable laws, foremost and most objectionable of which, perhaps, are "wine dinners." It seems absurd that a man should not have been able to dine at an hotel without having, or being expected to have, a pint of wine with his dinner, but in many houses use had rendered it almost unavoidable; and to do as others do, many an unfortunate man has had to pay for that which he was much better without, damaging, as it probably would, both his health and his pocket.

The same principle applies on many other occasions. The difficulty of saying no, and the desire not to appear churlish, leads commercial men, and especially young men, into expenses they cannot afford, and did not contemplate. The wine-dinner custom is now, we think, practically extinct, and a healthier system of a free or open dinner-table, where all can order what they fancy, and abstain from ordering what they don't fancy, has taken its place. The country traveller, too, when business is over, which generally occurs about five or six p.m., is liable to be dreadfully oppressed with *ennui*. The town he is in presents no novelties to him, as he has been there most likely often before, and he is thrown upon such attractions as hotel life affords, and these, as one can guess, are limited pretty strictly to billiards and brandy-and-water. It is scarcely to be wondered at that some members of the fraternity should fall into habits which savour too much of conviviality to allow of much prudence and thrift. But it is satisfactory to know that all this is improving. Thanks to the efforts of such bodies as the Travellers' Christian Association, libraries have been introduced into the leading hotels, and other movements in the direction of a profitable employment of leisure have been organised. It is, we think, only fair to lay these improvements to the credit of the trustworthiness and abilities of commercial travellers generally.

A. H.

