

SWEET ARE THE USES OF PUBLICITY

BY BENNETT CERF

ONE of the first press agents who turned publicity into a million-dollar business was the late Harry Reichenbach. This master of the art of exploitation has been called "the greatest single force in American advertising and publicity since Barnum." One of his earliest exploits was to salvage a little restaurant that had everything except customers. He put a simple bowl of water in the window with a sign reading, "The only living Brazilian invisible fish." Increasing crowds gathered to observe this phenomenon. Some swore they could see the invisible fish make the water move. Reichenbach promptly hid a little electric fan in the corner to blow ripples on the water. "There it goes," the crowd would cry, and then, for no apparent reason, would go inside to eat dinner. Business boomed for weeks. Reichenbach claimed later that the proprietor simply couldn't stand prosperity: he tried to serve the invisible fish as a course!

It was inevitable that Reichenbach and the expanding motion picture business should discover one another. He was engaged to publicize a grue-

some affair called *The Return of Tarzan*, after a prevue indicated that its chances were small. A few days later a bearded professor registered at the Belleclaire Hotel in New York as "T. R. Zann" and had a "piano" hoisted to his room by block and tackle. In reality, the piano box contained a toothless old lion. Mr. Zann then called room service and ordered fifteen pounds of raw meat. The puzzled waiter who brought it took one look into the room, and fled. "There's a live lion up there," he screamed. Mr. Zann then led the animal through the main lobby, causing (1) three old ladies to faint dead away, (2) the management to call the police emergency squad, and (3) Mr. "T. R. Zann" and his lion to get reams of publicity. By the time red-faced editors discovered it was all a publicity stunt a fifth-rate movie had been built up in the public mind as something to see.

Reichenbach next turned his attention to a little number called *The Virgin of Stamboul*. A "Turkish potentate" and staff of seventy took an entire floor at a swank hostelry. The potentate was reluctant to be inter-

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viewed, but finally consented to reveal that his brother, the sultan, had dispatched him to find the dastardly American sailor who had stolen the Number One favorite from the sultan's harem. It's hard to believe, but only one reporter in town saw through this hokus-pokus immediately. The exception was a former publicity man himself, who was so intrigued by the build-up that he held his peace until the story broke in the papers. Then *The Virgin of Stamboul* (which, by an odd coincidence, featured the abduction of a harem pin-up girl by a Yankee gob) opened triumphantly on Broadway, and the "Sultan's brother" went back to his dish-washing job in an Armenian restaurant.

As the picture industry prospered, its publicity methods became less crude and obvious. Reichenbach kept pace with their progress. When the Metro Pictures Corporation was formed, it had everything except a production department. Reichenbach kept exhibitors intrigued for a full year by a whirlwind campaign that featured the slogan "Can they keep it up?" What they were keeping up nobody, including themselves, knew, but in the end, perseverance won its just reward, and the Metro Corporation blossomed into Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer!

Reichenbach's imagination and audacity were not unique. The press agent for one Broadway show hired a huge truck to tour the city. The name of the play was emblazoned on its sides, and a loud speaker within blared

its virtues. At one of the most important intersections in the city, the truck broke down — accidentally, of course. Traffic was snarled in every direction for a full half hour while the merits of a fly-by-night musical comedy were broadcast to a stalled and helpless populace.

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It was another press agent who evolved the notion of taking a native Californian who had been unable to get a break in the movies, and shipping him to England where he became the janitor of a well-known London theatre. In the dead of night, the two changed the electric sign above the marquee, and put the youth's name in lights. With the photograph of this sign as his only evidence, the agent then convinced a big Hollywood studio that his client was one of the most popular stars in Britain, and secured a signed contract for him. The youth really had talent, and is a genuine picture star today. The same technique has been followed a dozen times since. A lot of those exotic foreign sirens you see writhing around the screen drew their first breaths in such typically Bohemian oases as Wichita and Erie.

One publicity man made a Broadway chop house nationally famous by the simple expedient of scattering sawdust on the floor. Another guided a shoe emporium to fame and fortune by persuading the proprietor to boost his fixed price from \$6.95 to \$12.95! The shoe man was at first incredulous

until the promoter proved his point by an actual experiment. He put two identical pairs of shoes in the show window, side by side. His sign read "There is absolutely no difference between these shoes. One pair is priced at \$6.95; the other at \$12.95. We just want to see which price you prefer!" Three women out of every four who entered the shop, suspecting chicanery of one sort or another, insisted upon paying \$12.95.

Harry Reichenbach's most hilarious achievement was connected with that third-rate, innocuous painting called *September Morn*. The proprietor of a Broadway art store had seen the original in Paris, and thought it had commercial possibilities. He had ordered innumerable reproductions in assorted sizes at a cost of over \$60,000. The unpredictable American public, however, paid no attention to *September Morn* and the dealer seemed stuck with his entire investment. It was at this juncture that he enlisted the services of Reichenbach. He got results within twenty-four hours.

Reichenbach put the biggest available print of *September Morn* in the dealer's window. Next he hired a dozen high-school kids and rehearsed them painstakingly in the routine he had decided upon. Then he burst into the office of Anthony Comstock, ever-ready head of the anti-vice squad and self-appointed custodian of the people's morals. "Mr. Comstock," cried Reichenbach, "there's a vile picture on display in a Broadway window, and school children are ogling it

this very minute!" Comstock grabbed his hat and the two made a running dive for the dealer's store. The kids saw Reichenbach coming, and, as previously arranged, began pointing at the picture, smirking, and making obscene remarks about it. Comstock charged into the store like a wounded bull and had the deliriously happy dealer clapped into jail. By the time, the excitement and nation-wide publicity had died down, *September Morn* was the best-known painting in the United States, and more than two million reproductions of it were sold.

Reichenbach employed a similar technique to turn Elinor Glynn's atrocious *Three Weeks* into a rip-roaring best-seller. He sent anonymous letters of protest to puzzled post-office officials all over the country. Finally the postmaster-general barred the book from the mails — and the stampede to buy it was on.

Astute publicity men have extricated million dollar enterprises from many a jam. One of their funniest stunts involved a magnate who "got in on the ground floor" of a new salmon canning project. The price of his stock was right, and the salmon was delicious. Unfortunately, the color of the salmon was pure white, instead of the customary pink. It tasted just as good as the best, but the public was used to *pink* salmon, and would have no truck with any other kind. The inventory reached alarming proportions, and bankruptcy loomed. Then the high-powered "public relations counsel" was called in. By printing

just one line in big type on every can of salmon in stock, he cleaned out the inventory in exactly four months, and, if rival canneries had not secured an ultimate injunction, would undoubt-

edly have put most of them out of business. The line that he suggested was simple. It read: "THIS SALMON IS GUARANTEED NOT TO TURN PINK IN THE CAN."



Behind the News: II

WHEN a published interview produces an unexpected or unwanted effect, it is conventional procedure for a high personage to take refuge in either outright denial or a claim of misquotation. Newspapermen do not combat the custom, and almost no personage has given evidence of regarding it as dishonest. An exception to the rule was Admiral George Dewey, No. 1 hero of the Spanish-American War.

In the crisis produced by Germany's blockade of the Venezuelan coast and challenge to the Monroe Doctrine, newspapers quoted Admiral Dewey as declaring the Kaiser was acting according to form and was bound to make trouble in the world. Berlin naturally took notice and the German ambassador made strong representations in Washington. President Theodore Roosevelt sent for Admiral Dewey. Frederick Palmer, an intimate of both, recorded what transpired between them, but it was not revealed until years later.

"Admiral, this is embarrassing. You will have to deny the interview," said T. R., who himself denied making statements that had troublesome repercussions. So, too, did the Kaiser, who on at least two different occasions revealed his mind with shocking frankness to writers and then repudiated his statements.

"Deny it, Mr. President! I said it!", protested the Admiral. "I didn't know the fellow who came up to me while I was out walking was going to publish it. The last time I met him he was a consul. I told him what I thought — and he sold it to a newspaper. I said it. I can't deny it. I won't lie."

"Then, Admiral," said T. R., "the only way out is for me to give you a public reprimand."

"Yes, sir. When, sir?"

The President named an hour next day. At the hour the Admiral appeared in full dress uniform, with all his medals. The President grinned when Dewey stood before him, tapped him on the wrist, and said: "Admiral, consider yourself reprimanded."

Official versions of the reprimand satisfied the German government.

— CLARK KINNAIRD

RUSSIA'S PLANS FOR GERMANY

BY DAVID J. DALLIN

IN the formulation of its foreign policy a dictatorial régime does not have to consult or educate its public opinion. This means that it enjoys complete maneuverability regardless of commitments. It can revise or even completely reverse a plan without notice, and it can pursue several contradictory lines of policy at the same time, prepared to implement the one that seems desirable at a given moment.

This needs to be understood in estimating the Soviet Government's intentions with respect to a defeated Germany. There are glaring contradictions in Stalin's policies. On the one hand he insists on the far-reaching punishment of the war guilty; on the other he permits a German committee loaded with typical upper-class military leaders and ex-Nazis to function in Moscow. At various times Soviet propaganda has hinted that a certain German military potential must be preserved; simultaneously there has been much Russian talk of reducing Germany to military impotence.

But all such contradictions will be washed out in action. Soviet policy is flexible and "realistic," so that much will depend on the world picture at the juncture when final decisions about Germany's fate must be put into effect.

Subject to this general caution, however, we can appraise Russia's basic plan. It deals with territorial readjustments, reparations, and the punishment of German war criminals.

Many persons, among them statesmen who have only hazy or sentimentalized notions about the nature of the Soviet state, have failed to recognize that the last point — punishment — is central in the Russian concept. To most Americans and Britons this matter seems incidental: just a problem in meting out "justice" and neutralizing German military leadership. They do not grasp the fact that to Communists such large-scale punishment represents a *social weapon*.

For the Soviet leaders, who think of themselves as ruthless "social engineers," the chance to destroy some

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