

DON'T TAKE IT TO HEART

Men who come into a shoe store are usually meek and apologetic, which may explain why Eliot Grundy had remained head salesman at Footfitter Shoes for over twenty-five years. A small, fussy man with glinting eyeglasses and white hair combed flatly and precisely over a growing bald spot, he had a surprisingly big, authoritative voice. When he announced bluntly that a customer ought to take a certain shoe, that shoe was as good as bought.

Mr. Cahill liked to watch Grundy sell, and he especially liked to show Saturday extras how it was done. Mr. Cahill was the store manager, had been since two years before Grundy came there, but he knew he couldn't, as he put it, hold a candle to Grundy's masterful selling.

"Now watch this," he said one day to a salesman named Barnes, who, as a matter of fact, never made the grade. "That gentleman wants a wingtip shoe in cordovan leather. Listen to Grundy handle him."

"It bites in front," the customer complained, standing up and flexing the shoe several times. "Could you put in a bite pad?"

"I could," Grundy said in his astonishing voice. "But I won't."

"Huh?" asked the customer and Barnes, both startled.

"If that's what the guy wants," Barnes continued to Mr. Cahill, "why shouldn't Grundy fix up the bite for him?" "He knows what he's doing," said Mr. Cahill. "Listen."

"I don't get it," the customer said bewilderedly. "If you charge for bite pads, that's okay."

Grundy hitched forward on his salesman's stool. "Not with me. Here, sit down." He lifted the customer's left ankle while the man was still standing, dumping him into a seat, then unlaced the shoe swiftly and shoved it hard against the sole of his foot. "All right now, let's see why it bites. Did you ever think of asking yourself that question? Shoes don't bite without a reason, you know. If they do, it's because *the last is all wrong for the foot.*"

The customer swallowed uneasily. "It is?"

"Wingtips are too narrow for you. See how this shoe tapers to a point?" He stopped and glinted his eyeglasses at the man. "Your feet don't come to a point, do they?"

"Well, no—"

"And cordovan is as hard and stiff a leather as there is. You have sensitive feet, don't you?"

"Well, yes—"

Mr. Cahill turned to Barnes with a smile of pride in craftsmanship. "There you are. The sale's wrapped up."

But it wasn't. The customer allowed Grundy to try on a pair that he thought was suitable, even walked around in them and confessed they were more comfortable. But he half-defiantly asked to try the others again.

"I'll take these," he started to say, and then saw Grundy's lips compress disapprovingly. "You—you think I ought to take the ones with the broad tips?"

"I do," stated Grundy.

The customer sighed. "Oh, all right. They look lousy, but at least they feel good."

Grundy, wrapping up the package, favored him with his tight end-of-a-sale smile. "That's the important thing, isn't it?"

"I guess so. Well, sure! Why should I pinch my feet into narrow shoes—"

"Where the last is all wrong," Grundy supplied.

"—yeah, just so people'll think I have narrow feet? Hell with them. My comfort comes first," the customer said belligerently, justifying a decision that had been forced on him.

"I'll be damned," Barnes said, standing at the entrance to the stockroom with Mr. Cahill.

"You've seen a master at work, Barnes," said Cahill almost reverently. "Never forget this moment and the lesson you've learned."

But Mr. Cahill had his troubles with Grundy. It was fine, of course, to have a salesman who never missed a day at work, who never came in late, who always kept the floor around his stool tidy—"Put

away the shoes as soon as you take them off," Grundy was fond of saying forcefully, "and besides not littering the place, you don't get customers confused about which pair to buy." Grundy was a demon on stock; he hated to see it upset—although "hated" is perhaps too mild a term—he always went into a rigidly controlled rage and let customers wait until he had the stock back in shape again.

That was one thing that upset Mr. Cahill. He believed that the customer always came first. Grundy, on the other hand, argued that disorganized stock ruined a salesman's efficiency.

"How can a man sell if he doesn't know where things are?"

"But there's always time to straighten out the shelves *after* you've finished a sale," Mr. Cahill pointed out.

"I can't work that way."

"Grundy," said Mr. Cahill, more than once, "there's a customer out front. You will please go out and wait on him."

"Is that an order, sir?" Grundy would ask ironically.

"It is."

At first, Grundy used to head uncertainly for the entrance to the stockroom, glance back at the unfinished stock, and then halt, visibly fighting his desire to straighten up and his reluctance to follow that specific command.

"I'll be through in a few minutes," he'd mumble. "You go."

Then there was Grundy's refusal to try on a right shoe first. Every so often, somebody says to the salesman, "My right foot is bigger than the left. I'd like to fit that one first." And salesmen, Mr. Cahill held, should be happy to oblige a customer in so small a matter.

"But the shoes aren't put that way in the box," Grundy obstinately said. "The right shoe is under the tissue paper. It's the left one that comes out first."

"So take a little longer putting them back."

"That is not how I learned to sell shoes, Mr. Cahill: first the left shoe, then the right. I don't mind putting *both* of them on a customer, but I won't go fishing the right one out of the tissue."

He never did, either.

There were many more ways in which Grundy refused to budge, and Mr. Cahill sometimes thought seriously of getting rid of him. But those occasions were only temporary crises, which Grundy always won by sticking to his rigidly set ways, and Mr. Cahill, after cooling off, realized that a salesman of Grundy's caliber should not be fired just because he won't change his methods. If not for Grundy, he had to admit, the store would have trouble meeting its sales quota.

But that was only part of it. Mr. Cahill had studied Grundy over the years, as he felt any good manager should in order to get the best out of his help, and he understood just what was the root of Grundy's trouble.

"I'll drive you home," he said once, when they were locking up for the day. "I want to talk to you about something."

Grundy's sudden distress would have been invisible to anybody else, but not to Mr. Cahill. He said, "But I always go by subway."

"That's what I mean," Mr. Cahill declared. "You always this and you always that, as if there's only one way to do something. Now come on, pile into the car. It's not far out of the way for me."

Grundy looked around as if cops with drawn guns were closing in on him. "No. I mean—no, thanks. I'll take the subway. It's—ah—faster."

"You're not in any hurry." Mr. Cahill held open the door, but Grundy stayed where he was. Ignoring the people passing by, Mr. Cahill said, "I want to help you, Grundy, and I think I can. I've made a study of psychology—that's how I got where I am—and I know what makes a human being tick. You're not ticking, Grundy. You're sticking at half-past."

"I'm not complaining," Grundy replied. "If you're dissatisfied with my work—"

"No, no. It's not that at all. You're—well, you're inflexible. You act as if something awful would happen if you changed your ways."

"Things wouldn't get done right," Grundy said stubbornly.

"They would. Maybe better. You're *afraid* to change. What do you think would happen if you took off the right shoe first, for instance? The customer might die? You might? The floor would cave in? *What?*"

"I'm late," said Grundy. "I have to get home. Things to do—"

He hurried toward the subway. Mr. Cahill, getting moodily into the car, thought he had lost again.

But Grundy was disturbed by Mr. Cahill's shrewd analysis of his fixed behavior pattern. He was no less forceful with customers, yet he wondered if his doing things without variation was merely a question of training. Without even Mr. Cahill being aware of it, Grundy tried a minor experiment—he started lacing a shoe by slipping one end of the lace through alternate holes and then going back to do the same with the other end, instead of painstakingly working one hole at a time from side to side, as he always did. He'd considered it a better, more conservative way, one that did a neater job, but now he wasn't sure and he wanted to be.

He didn't exactly *do* it. He started or, rather, he *thought* about starting. But his hand began to shake and he felt the pressure of terror mount alarmingly in him. Something frightful would occur if he did it—it was as if the walls and the ceiling bulged threateningly at him, daring him to go on.

"If you don't mind, I'm in a hurry," the customer said, and Grundy, relieved to find an excuse, swiftly laced the shoe as he invariably did.

He tried leaving the stock to wait on people; even, when he was asked, to put on the right shoe first; but panic rose in him each time. He knew nothing would happen. He knew it, he knew it, he knew it!

He knew nothing of the sort, only that there was a ghastly sense of fear, a feeling that disaster was daring him to do something differently. He said nothing to Mr. Cahill, but he stopped experimenting. It was much more comfortable. And somehow safer, like taking the match away from a bomb that might blow up himself, the store, customers and Mr. Cahill.

Mr. Cahill, however, neglected to notice Grundy's anxious tries and relieved relapse. A memo had come from Mr. Munson, the president of the company, and Mr. Cahill was worried about it. He knew there would be trouble with Grundy. He attempted to head off the explosion.

"You know," said Mr. Cahill, in what he hoped was a casual tone, as he and Grundy sat at the back of the store after the lunch-hour rush was over, "more than half of the people in the world are women!"

"Anybody who rides in a subway can tell you that," Grundy replied with his usual rancor.

"That's an awful lot of shoes, even figuring one pair each."

"And a lot more selling time. You can wrap up five sales to men in the time it takes to sell a woman."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Mr. Cahill objected jocularly. "It takes a little longer, perhaps, but just think how many customers!"

"Somebody else can wait on them. I wouldn't."

Mr. Cahill tried to change Grundy's attitude by breaking it down a little at a time, but he didn't have that long. When Grundy came in on a Monday morning—exactly five minutes early, as always—and went back to the stockroom to put away his jacket, Mr. Cahill stood holding his breath, his entire body stiff, waiting for the blast.

"Mr. Cahill!" Grundy's voice was bigger and more terrifying with indignation than Mr. Cahill remembered ever hearing it before. "May I ask the meaning of this—this *sacrilege?*"

Mr. Cahill filled his lungs and straightened his back and went into the stockroom, where Grundy was glaring at shelves of narrow boxes.

"What's the idea of this, Mr. Cahill?" Grundy demanded. "These are *women's shoes*, aren't they?"

"Why, yes," Mr. Cahill said innocently. "I thought you understood from our conversations that—"

"So that's what you were driving at! Turning Footfitters into a damned female shop!"

"It wasn't my idea," Mr. Cahill said. "Orders from the office."

"Well, they're not going to make me sell women's shoes. As of right here and now, I quit, Mr. Cahill. I'll find another man's shoe-store, and when that one starts selling to women, I'll find another."

He was outside, glowering at the display the window dressers had put in over the weekend and

which he'd missed seeing when he came in, probably because the windows were changed so seldom, before Mr. Cahill caught up with him and grabbed his arm.

"Grundy, this isn't fair to Footfitters," Mr. Cahill said in outrage. "You haven't given notice. Are you going to leave Footfitters in the lurch on *opening* day—you, the head salesman, the one we were counting on to put us across?"

"Well—" Grundy began hesitantly, sounding like one of his own former customers.

"Of course you're not! You've been loyal to Footfitters all these years. I can't believe you'd be disloyal at the last moment."

"All right," Grundy capitulated. "I'll help out—but only as far as taking care of men customers goes."

It was Mr. Cahill's first victory and he knew better than to push further. Grundy went back to the stockroom, muttering at the slim boxes, and changed his coat. He stood at the back and watched sourly as women came pouring into the store, eager to buy something and get the free pocketbook or stockings Footfitters was offering. He made no attempt to help the extras, naturally. Mr. Cahill knew he would not go front until a male customer entered, which seemed good enough until the store was mobbed and women were screaming to be waited on.

"Mr. Grundy," said Mr. Cahill tentatively, "I wish you'd jump in just for today. We just can't handle the crowd. And what if Mr. Munson should drop in and see you standing there?"

"Well, what if he should?"

"I know you don't care any more, now that you've decided to leave Footfitters, but think of my career, Mr. Grundy. You know what the office would say—and do."

"That's your affair," Grundy said. "I'm not budging from here until a man customer comes in."

"And you know none will as long as we have all these women here," Mr. Cahill said in a high and despairing wail.

"I know it."

"Then how do you figure you're helping me out?"

Grundy turned his hostile view of the alien invasion of the store to Mr. Cahill. "I'm a man of habit, as you yourself observed. I like routine, in spite of your ideas about why I do things certain ways. I've lived my life the way I was brought up to, doing certain things in certain ways at certain times, and I don't want to change that for you, for Mr. Munson, or for anybody else."

He didn't mention that he had attempted to change his habits and the overwhelming panic he had experienced. He knew better; Mr. Cahill, being an amateur psychoanalyst, would have told him it was because of rivalry with his father or his rebellion against early toilet training or something equally annoying and preposterous.

"That, Grundy, is compulsive behavior," Mr. Cahill said severely. "A compulsive neurotic does what he does because he's afraid of the consequences if he does or doesn't. I mean it's like defying your parents, so to speak, and fearing punishment."

"Nuts," replied Grundy, a word he had previously only thought.

"What do you think would happen if you waited on a woman?"

Grundy's aggressive composure shook slightly. Remembering what he'd suffered in his abortive experiments, he had been trying not to think of that. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Then why not find out? You'll see it's not so terrible." Mr. Cahill caught him by the wrist and hauled him toward a seat, where a stout woman was sitting impatiently. "Here is our head salesman, madam. He'll take care of you personally."

"Well, thank goodness *somebody* will," she said in a peevish voice. "Or will he? What's he standing there for, like a *goon*?"

"Go on, Grundy," Mr. Cahill said in an urgent whisper. "She won't eat you."

"I am not afraid of her or anybody else," Grundy said with dignity, but he shook with apprehension and dread—of something he couldn't recognize—as he lowered his rump to the stool.

He stood up immediately, sweating.

"I—can't!"

"Of course you can," Mr. Cahill said persuasively. "Sit down. There, that's a good fellow. Now take

off her shoe. Her shoe, Mr. Grundy."

"My right foot's bigger than my left," she said. "That's the one I want fitted."

Grundy goggled at her in horror. "Your—right—foot?" "You heard the lady," said Mr. Cahill. "The right foot first." Grundy reached for it, but he drew back. "No!"

"Good Lord," Mr. Cahill exclaimed in exasperation. "The world won't end if you wait on a woman and try on the right shoe first!"

But, of course, it did.

JOURNAL NOTES: Don't Take It to Heart

THEME: Changing or shucking a compulsion—a habit that has become so deeply grooved that it's an almost unclimbable trench—always produces a feeling of impending doom. Freud and his followers (his opponents, too, for that matter) maintain that this is merely ritualistic thinking. But what if there's an exception?

POSSIBILITIES: Voodoo and other such primitivisms are too blatant; the reader would anticipate the ending right from the start. Must have as ordinary a character as can be found. Spinsters, bookkeepers and kids—it's about time fantasy left them alone, gave them a chance to freshen up through a long rest between stories. Rigid personality needed; can't think of any more unyielding than man I used to work with when I sold shoes. Dogmatic, opinionated, so set in his habits that he sold *his* way, by God, and no customer or manager could alter it. Good chance also to let the reader in on the trade secrets. Go easy on jargon of the business—takes too much explanation and holds up narrative.

DEVELOPMENT: Character is set, background is set. Whole story depends on strong detail, but keep it short; too long and the punch will either be telegraphed or get as pudgy as a soggy cream puff. Too short, though, and characterization and background will be compressed out of the story. Write first, cut out fat after.

EDITORIAL COMMENT: Competent and craftsmanlike, but not one of my personal favorites. That's no criterion, to be sure; authors aren't the best judges of their own work and, like parents, often tend to be fondest of brain-children that others are indifferent to and vice versa. I'm satisfied with the inside stuff, which I assure you is thoroughly authentic—I was a hotshot shoe dog and could T.I. (talk into) a skig (P.M., which probably means poor or past merchandise, calling for a bonus ranging from a dime to a dollar), or handle a T.O. (turnover, a hard customer) with the best of them, working everything from schlak (cheap) stores to Fifth Avenue salons while I was learning how to write. After I finished the story, I was worried that the payoff might be obvious. But Editor Howard Browne said no and readers seemed to agree with him. A worrywart, that's me—I used to fret about fit long after customers had left the shop and the unhappy practice is carried over into writing and editing. It's corrosive to the nerves, but produces better work . . . though sometimes I envy the oblivious joyousness of amateurs. All professionals envy that, while at the same time realizing that what's wrote easy reads hard, as somebody either said or should have said.