

# Personal and Confidential by Jack Lait

WALTER CLIPSON, G. B. C. (graduate of business college), was off to a flying start on a life of commerce and industrial career. Aged twenty-two, typically "clean cut" (which means that he was neither a dude nor a slob, neither a chump nor a wise-cracking pest), equipped with a mechanical education on type writer, adding machine, biller, automatic postage and envelope affixing instrument, he was just such a youth as might take a lot of worries off the mind of a busy man.

He knew how to call a 'phone number, how to give and take stalling messages over the wire, how to tell a caller Mr. Brownson was out of town when he wasn't even out of hearing, how to make an important prospect feel even more important, how to turn down an undesirable so he wouldn't ever peep again, what to say to Mrs. Brownson when Mr. Brownson spent an afternoon out and the wife wanted to know where she could reach him—in all, a very handy young party to have about for \$25 a week.

Brownson was the senior partner of a railroad supply concern that dealt in big contracts. It wasn't a business with a continual turnover, like a delicatessen store or a newspaper. Sometimes Brownson & Elton didn't land a sale for a month, but when anything clicked it was big.

There was a great deal of entertaining to do. That seemed to be the soul of the business. The railroads, after all, got their rails and their wheels and their oceans and their brass buttons—or whatever it is that railroads buy through railroad supply middlemen—from the same original sources, no matter through which agents they shopped. So it was a contest between the rivals to ingratiate themselves personally with the purchasing officials, often the presidents themselves, to induce them to do business their way; the factories paid the commissions, so the transportation chiefs were not betraying their trust, and they naturally dealt with those they liked best; and they naturally liked best those who treated them best.

And Harlow Brownson was a de luxe, big-league, shoot-the-roll treater.

Blowing a thousand in one night toward hooking a sale that would net ten times that was no novelty to him. Sometimes the disbursement went into overhead and never came back to roost in the deposits at all, but as a rule Brownson was a far-sighted snipster who rarely misjudged range or wind, and wasted few shots though he kept pumping away.

Elton was the other end of the combination. He bargained and crabbed with the producers, and almost never even met the consumers. Brownson got the orders and Elton executed them. So everybody was pleased and B. & E. became the standard leader in the field and the principals therein became rich. Brownson grew fat and amiable from much over-training, while Elton grew lean and grouchy from much merchandising.

Walter Clipson was assistant to Brownson. Not that he assisted him in his "field" work, which was operated largely in the rocco cafes, the raucous cabarets and a giddy apartment maintained by the house in a select downtown building for "promotion" purposes, but he attended to the office affairs of the jovial missionary of ties and monkey-wrenches. Brownson had his own offices, in a wing of the suite, with a sideboard camouflaged as a letter-file, choice rugs and easier chairs than customarily go with the exacting business of extracting dollars from hot air.

In the outer room of this layout sat Doris Horner, secretary to Brownson.

Doris was blonde and petite, slender and alluring. She dressed with the simplicity regarded as desirable in the financial zone, yet she added touches of personal individuality that couldn't be objectionable, and yet were not to be overlooked. For one thing, she affected earrings. With the fetching little collar of laundered linen, those earrings couldn't be ruled out as vamping stuff or stretching office conventions too broadly. She wore sleeveless sleeves, but they were in fashion and her virginal white arms, as they flew over the keyboard, were very attractive and not too extravagant.

Brownson, in truth, was no stickler for the last squawk in disciplinary conservatism; but—Walter Clipson was.

Moreover, of course, Clipson was feverishly and furiously in love with Doris, as any youth who was sentenced to spend eight hours a day in her presence would have been.

Doris was not the slangy, gum-chewing steno of the movies; neither was she the upstage lady in reduced circumstances of other movies; nor was she a frivolous flapper, and yet she was no phlegmatic automaton. She was vibrantly human and intriguingly feminine. She was no dynamo as a secretary, but neither was she an inefficient mis-cast leading lady. She could and would take dictation and turn out reasonably clean copy; she could spell the entire language of the trade and the uncommercial words that naturally crept into some of the letters keyed H. B. D. H. For Brownson kept up intimate correspondence with chairmen of boards and receivers and first vice-presidents and traffic managers and purchasing directors the world around.

Brownson always greeted Doris cheerfully, now and then gave her a flower, often sent her to a show with her mother and had her charge the tickets to his account at a broker's—and in other ways treated her generously. But he never took or attempted any familiarities with her; he never pinched her cheek or looked insidiously into her blue eyes or made any comment more penetrating than to compliment her when she looked more than usually rosy.

Brownson wasn't the melodrama sort of boss to the glided den of the portly spider at all. Though he was of the "frake" disposition, he was no rone-a-rounder, but square. Doris liked her boss very much, and wasn't in the least afraid of him stepping out of his character.

But Walter Clipson watched with jealous eye who seemed to him quite unnecessary for the



routine of a practical office. He was displeased with Doris's display of arms—that is, the arms and the display not only pleased him but dizzied him; but he was against anyone else being in the picture. The ear-rings, he thought most becoming but most malapropos. He advised her against the two plain gold bracelets on her right wrist, which now and then clinked as she operated, and which he regarded as out of order.

And most of all, he didn't see why Doris couldn't drop her head and bow stiffly when Brownson entered, in place of giving him a sunny smile and even a little wave of her hand. He regarded Brownson as honorable enough, but he cautioned Doris that just such transgression of the line of relations between employer and employee encouraged men who weren't naturally "fresh" to forget—to mis-understand—to presume.

Doris gave him the merry and red-lipped ha-ha and twitted him because he, the apostle of strictly business during business hours had proposed to her eight hundred times, implored her to marry him and quit her \$30 a week to marry into his \$25. Doris had declined his offer as many times as he had proposed it, and a few times extra for good measure. She made him know that she regarded him as a strippling, a precocious office boy, and she teased it at him that if he had a few more of Brownson's traits of liberality, freedom, geniality and good-fellowship, he would step along faster in life.

To this Walter replied that it was Brownson's privilege to be a "sport" if he wanted to, but it was his own obligation to be the best sort of an office man that he knew how to be. Doris told him she didn't think he'd ever get anywhere or amount to much, and he sighed to see that she admired the free and easy Brownson, good sort though he was, and sneered at the homely, wholesome, faithful sort—like himself.

"Brownson got it over, yes—but that was due to an extraordinary combination of circumstances," he told her. "It wouldn't do for a young man to follow in his footsteps. The straight road is the best, the shortest, the surest."

"All right, rain on the parade," she replied. "Then put on your earmuffs and your galoshes and stop along by yourself. Me for some man who has life—spirit—pep."

And Walter shook his blond, wavy head and worried over this flippant and oblique angle on the future in the mind of the girl he idolized. He felt it would bring her to no good end and would most likely plunge her into ruin and a wrecked thereafter of remorse. She said she'd look after her own thereafter, and would be please go on pasting his postage stamps by machinery he knew something about, and not worry about such intricate mechanics as a girl's heart, a man's character, psychology and ethics.

Then came a day when word was conveyed to

Walter that Jere Santerson, second vice-president and head purchasing mogul of the P. D. & Q., would arrive shortly after noon, would ask for Mr. Brownson, and was to be met as best.

Brownson didn't propose to be there when Santerson arrived. He had his modus operandi worked out to the thirty-third degree; Santerson, who was following many a good man in the same pro-

cedure, was to be shown into the inner room, where he could cool his fevered heels for a few minutes while he studied the framed photographs showing discreetly selected close-up views illustrating some bonanza contracts that B. & E. had handled. He was to have the atmosphere of business stability planted, he was to be impressed with what a truly big and reliable institution Brownson & Elton was. Then Brownson was to burst in whack him on the back, protest against having his guest cooped up in a musty commercial hole (it had cost \$10,000 to fit up the chamber), wink and close the door and produce cocktail ingredients as an advance angel to the choicest luncheon the town could set up, all prearranged.

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who entered a moment later with her hat on and her gloves in hand. He was mixing a little drink. He gave one to Santerson, who reached it to Doris. "No, Santerson," interposed Brownson, "I couldn't have that."

Santerson gave him a little look and drank it himself. Brownson usually pushed six or so cocktails on his luncheon guests, but this time he cut it to the one and, reaching for his hat, said "Shall we go?" Santerson had to, after that.

Doris was floating on air as she waited for the elevator with her employer and the out-of-towner. It was an adventure—to lunch with Brownson; to have a man "fall" so hard that he would ask that she be invited, and on such short sight; to have luncheon at last in one of the miracle cafes about which she had read and heard, the monthly bills of which had made her head swim as she had forwarded Brownson's checks to cover theirs.

But uppermost, Walter had seen the whole tri-angled transaction. And she had a fair idea of what was buzzing around in his breast just about then. Whew! It was against every rule that he had laid down for her, it was against all office discipline and even beyond discretion, and it seemed surely to bear out his prophecies of disaster and destruction: the unemotional and lovesick youth would be tearing his permanent wave by now, she figured. And she smiled—smiled just as Santerson said something to her about the advanced fashions in sleeveless dresses and what a shame it was to cover up natural beauty with an ulcer—and Santerson thought she smiled on him, and he pressed her arm through the unwelcome sleeve as Brownson walked ahead of them into the elevator.

The luncheon was all that it would have been in cuisine and surroundings. Doris had never seen in anything like the chic, quiet little resort of elegance and grand larceny that Brownson had chosen. She felt a little abashed and out of place when they first entered, but when she surrendered the \$20 coat to a uniformed maid, touched up a bit, and Brownson and Santerson both rose at the table as she tripped along in her sleeveless frock, she felt more as though she belonged.

Santerson pushed the conversation forward with Western breeziness, his naturally pleasing way. Brownson's tactful resistance notwithstanding, Santerson turned the whole luncheon into topics closely touching Doris. He wasn't interested in theatricals, sports, funny yarns. Railroads, of course, were completely tabooed. But he was all churned up about Doris, and he asked her an unbroken stream of questions about herself, some of them rather searching, intimate, though none of them specifically offensive.

Brownson, who couldn't remember when he had last been made gooseflesh at his own luncheon, when he had been shoved into a silent third while steering a come-on, had very little to say. His heart wasn't in the job, and he heartily didn't care whether B. & E. got a million dollar order or not. He was mighty sorry that he had so weakly followed Santerson's suggestion and asked Doris at all—he could have ended the whole matter then by refusing, but he had become a particeps criminis, and now he had to see it out.

He was fully determined, if Santerson said one out-of-the-way word to the girl, to rise in a frank anger and send her back to the office, and then to give Santerson a piece of his heart. But Santerson, for a blunt commoner, had enough natural or acquired diplomacy to skate around on the thin ice of Brownson's patience. And Brownson, with a sigh of relief, scratched his name on the bad news and tossed the waiter a bill.

Santerson was for seeing a matinee—vaudeville, he preferred. And he made no bones about asking whether Doris could accompany him. The girl looked inquiringly—perhaps eagerly—into Brownson's face, but he very simply and quite crisply said "No—Miss Horner has a great deal of important work to do this afternoon. You will excuse her?" Santerson shrugged his shoulders; he would, of course—but!

Brownson led them out, put Miss Horner in a taxi and sent her along. Then he asked Santerson what vaudeville theatre he preferred. Santerson said he guessed he didn't want any show—he'd just stroll over to the P. D. & Q. office and see if there were any wires—he'd see Brownson later—maybe next day. Brownson bid him good day as decently as he could, and left him there. He walked to the office, feeling somehow like a horse thief. The first face he saw when he entered was Walter's. "Any messages?" asked Brownson.

"Yes—one; from me. . . . Before I resign, I want to tell you that I didn't think you'd do a thing like that, Mr. Brownson. . . . It isn't gentlemanly, and it isn't good business."

"What the devil are you raving about?" asked Brownson, though he knew—that is, he knew what Walter had in mind, but not why Walter felt called on to interfere.

"About Doris—Miss Horner. Because she is silly enough to do a thing like—like that, is no reason for you, a man of the world, to ask her—even to let her."

"Perhaps you're right. But I don't entirely see where it's any of your business."

"It's this much my business, Mr. Brownson. Mr. Santerson phoned while you were on the way. He invited Miss Horner out to meet him—promised her a better job out West than you'd give her here—told her you were the worst shine as a salesman he'd ever met, and you'd get enough business from the P. D. & Q. to stick in your eye."

"He did, eh? Where is Miss Horner?"

"She's gone home."

"Home? You think she's really gone home, you young fool? I'm going out to find that fresh Santerson and Miss Horner. You stick here—I might need you by 'phone, I'm—"

"Don't worry about it," sneered Walter. "She's gone home, all right—for her mother. That awful Santerson proposed to her on the wire—and she's accepted him. Good bye."

"Well, I'll be dashed," puffed Brownson. "Why didn't I help it along and hook the P. D. & Q. for tinner, saving girls! Serves me right. . . . mixing purity with pig-iron."

He Cautioned Doris That Just Such Transgressions of the Line Encouraged Men Who Weren't Naturally "Fresh" to Forget.

Brownson realized Santerson was a bit preoccupied, and glanced through, too. He saw what Santerson saw. But he didn't get the significance for a moment—not until Santerson whistled and said, "Gee—what a pippin."

Brownson thought a second. Then he closed the door.

"She's a nice girl, Santerson," he said. "Yes—I've heard of some of the darbs that you introduce the high muck-a-mucks to," said Santerson.

"Oh, behave. Of course, I do know a few show girls around town, and now and then I do meet up with a couple of cuties when one of the gang happens to be along. But don't get Miss Horner confused with that set—she's my secretary; she's a mighty nice girl—lives with her mother, you know."

"Sure. I don't want to knock her in the head and drag her to my cave, or anything. But I think she's the best looking thing my eyes have treated me to in many a year. Would she—hm—go out?"

Brownson was posed. It had never occurred to him this had never occurred to him.

"Why, I—I've never asked her. You see, my office—"

"Well, I don't mean anything wrong. How about lunch? Could she make it three—with you alone, do you suppose?"

"She could, I guess—if she would. I'll ask her."

Brownson went out and closed the door behind him.

"Miss Horner," he said, "this is unusual. I am not going to urge anything on you. I will only tell you what I have heard. That gentleman is Jere Santerson, and he might give you a half-million-dollar order if we make him feel good. But I never carried my special function of making buyers feel good into this department. He has taken a great fancy to you—on sight—and he—he wants you to lunch with us—with him and me—do you want to?"

"Naturally," answered Doris. "Dell-had."

"Come in," invited Brownson. "Thanks. Remember though, if you decline it's all right and no hard feelings."

Brownson introduced Santerson to Miss Horner,