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Business as Usual, During Alterations

Throughout most of recorded history mankind has lived within an economy of scarcity. Only in the last half-century have technological developments made an economy of abundance possible, at least in the West and Japan. The costs involved in this process were high, not only in terms of human exploitation but also in more subtle ways. For example, the explosion of available consumer goods has produced considerable confusion, part of the "future shock" phenomenon of being surrounded by so much diversity that it is difficult to enjoy any of it. Because technological change has been so rapid, entire industries have been created and wiped out almost overnight. The resourcefulness often shown by the businessman to these developments has been little short of amazing--the transition from a literally "horse-powered" transportation system to the automobile and from the blacksmith to the mechanic are but examples.

"Business as Usual, During Alterations" presents members of the business community facing the greatest crisis in the history of economic relationships. Competition is supposed to be the essence of the Free Enterprise System (at least on paper)--but it was never supposed to be like this.

The Sector Coordinator frowned, studying the report on his desk. In the concise symbology of sociodynamic calculus, it still covered several pages. "Preposterous!" he said. "Utterly preposterous!"

The Chief of the Observation Team nodded. "Quite," he agreed. "Valid, though."

"But it's ridiculous. Your prognosis indicates complete self-extermination by the natives of this planet . . . uh Earth, in less than one Galactic quarter. It's . . . well, preposterous!"

"Exactly," the observer said.

"But we can't have it. We need this planet. The only inhabited system in fifty light-years, a civilization just on the verge of technological

expansion, young, vigorous--and now, this. We'll have to assume direct control, move in a full administrative staff . . . why, it will cost billions, we could set up a colony of our own almost as cheaply. There must be a mistake. " The Coordinator flipped back through the pages. "Ah," he exclaimed. "Thought so. Here, this intergroup belligerence function, a purely inductive generalization which you apply in an unprecedented situation. Not valid. In effect, you are saying these people cannot adjust. Why, their whole history is one of adaptation--they take anything, absolutely anything, according to your observational data, and adapt it to their ends."

The Chief Observer nodded. "Individual ends, though, not social ends. That's the crux. Me first, to hell with the other guy. Works well enough when one man can't reach much farther than he can throw a rock, or shout orders more than a few hundred yards. Not so well, though, when you can say 'jump, frog,' to a whole continent at once, and back it up with hydrogen bombs. To control that level of power, you need cultural adaptability, instinctive or reasoned. These people don't have either." He paused and scratched thoughtfully at his chin, or what would have been his chin, if he had been human.

"I will admit, though, the math is a little shaky. So, we've prepared a check. With your approval, we intend to introduce a gadget to these people. Nonlethal, individually desirable, but culturally deadly--so presented that they can accept or reject it, with the choice spelled out for them. The beauty of it is, we kill two birds with one stone. If they accept--blooey goes their civilization; all we have to do is move in and fill the vacuum. If they reject, we don't have to move in, I'm wrong. "

"What kind of gadget?"

"Well, what kind of gadget would do it? Remember, a highly competitive culture, based on economy of scarcity; things--property, or its use--exchanged for services on an individual basis

"The matter duplicator!"

"Exactly."

It was about midmorning, I suppose, when we began to hear the first rumors of the duplicator at Brown's.

One of the account clerks came running over to tell me about it during the morning coffee break. The story was that someone had in-

vented a machine which could reproduce instantly, out of thin air, any physical object. She had it from one of the other girls, who got it from an elevator operator, who got it from a customer.

In a big store like Brown's,, with so many women working, you hear all kinds of rumor. "Well, that's certainly very interesting," I told her. "What won't they think of next! I'll have to be sure to catch the eleven o'clock news."

A few minutes later, however, Pete Martens in Appliances called up to tell me it was on TV. "You'd better take a look, Mr. Thomas," he said. "If this isn't a gag, it's something pretty big."

"Thank you, Pete," I said. "I'll be right down." I don't keep a TV in my office; it's a bad example to set for executive personnel, I feel.

There were several knots of customers and salespeople clustered around the demonstrators in Appliances. Pete saw me step out of the elevator and opened up a place. "Right here, Mr. Thomas," he said.

I nodded thanks and looked at the screen. A man sat behind a desk, talking. On the desk was a black box, a cube about ten inches on a side, with two pans, side by side, on top--something like a kitchen .scales. A red button was set in the face of the cube. Below it was a plate with some printing.

Anything small enough to place on the pan,", the man was saying, "absolutely anything." He picked up a pair of desk shears, tossed them on one pan, pushed the button. An identical pair instantly appeared on the other pan. He rummaged in his pocket, brought out a key ring, duplicated that. He took off his glasses, duplicated them.

"Or," he said, "you can do this. Hand me that other duplicator, please." A hand came into the picture, holding a contraption similar to the one the demonstrator had been using. He placed it on one pan, pushed the button, removed it and the duplicate. With a careless gesture, he swept the original machine off the desk. It crashed when it hit the floor. He smiled and looked into the camera.

"Don't worry, folks," he said. "There's plenty more where that came from." With the machine he had just made he duplicated another, another, another, until the desk was covered with them.

"How do they work?" I asked Martens.

He struggled. "Nobody knows. There were a couple of them sitting on the city hall steps this morning. No name plates, no identification, just a tag telling how to work them and something about chipping foundations. They had the back off one just before you came down; it

looks like some sort of electronic gadget, but the studio engineers couldn't figure it out, so they sent a couple over to the university, Stumped them, too." He laughed nervously.

"Maybe the brownies left them .

. . . Just one thing to remember, folks," the TV was saying. I looked back at the screen. The duplicators had been removed, except for one, and the man was holding a hamster in the palm of one hand. "Don't try to duplicate little Johnny because he's so cute you'd like a dozen of him."

He placed the hamster on one pan, pushed the button. The duplicated hamster jumped high in the air at the moment of materialization and fell to the desk, jerking violently for a moment before it was still. The original crept to the edge of the pan and stared at it, nose twitching.

"Do you think it could be a hoax?" I asked Martens. "You know, trick photography, something like that?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. It's on the other channels too, this fellow's putting on the best show, but they're all full of it. Radio, too. "

"He's putting on a good show, all right." I looked at the customers around me, all hanging pop-eyed on the demonstrator's slightest move. "If we just had a few thousand of those things here in the store right now, with all this buildup--

"Well, yes," Martens said. "It kind of scares me, though. You know, all those things, just make anything you want,, as many as you want, zip, zip, zip, like that. What I mean, my brother works in a place where they make things like scissors. What about him?"

I nodded thoughtfully. "I see what you mean. That duplicator, it could be a whole factory in itself, no materials costs, no labor costs - why, it'll wreck the whole price structure. No buying; we can set up a few duplicators and make our own merchandise. No inventory; we stock just one of everything. Receiving? We wipe out the whole department. Warehousing? Ditto." I began really to see possibilities. "Pete," I said, "you're right, this is big, really big." I looked around for a phone. "I'd better call Mr. Brown right now."

Mr. Brown must have been watching the same program at home. I could hear it in the background, something about bigger duplicators now.

"Yes, I know, John." His voice sounded dead.

I've been watching it. Probably means the end of our whole economy, I suppose. Did you read what that tag on the machine said?"

"Martens said something about chipping foundations."

"I copied it down-just a minute-here it is. There was something about how to operate the machine, then this: 'Warning! A push of the button grants your heart's desire. It is also a chip at the foundations of human society. A few billion such chips will bring it crashing down. The choice is yours.' Well, I guess the chips are flying already. My General Motors stock-" He groaned.

Over in the appliance department I caught a glimpse of the screen. A toy automobile was on one pan of the duplicator. The announcer was using a toy crane to lift duplicates off the other pan, ranging them in neat rows on the desk top.

"But what about the store, Mr. Brown?" I asked.

"I don't know, John, I just don't know. You're there, you do the best you can, just hang tough till we see how things are going to work out. "

Hang tough! In this business, people who hang tough and wait to see how things work out get plowed under. If you want to stay in business, you get on top of trends and move with them. Well, Mr. Brown used to be a real merchant, he built Brown's up from a corner variety store; but that was forty years ago and we all get old.

"O.K., Mr. Brown," I said. "I'll do what I can."

"Fine, John, I know you will."

He hung up, before I could do the same, the operator broke in "Oh, Mr. Thomas," she said.

"Mrs. Jones wants you in Ladies Wear; she says it's emergency."

Mrs. Jones is one of those people to whom everything is an emergency, but Ladies' Wear is on the first floor, only a few aisles from the phone I had been using. "Thank you, Connie," I said. "I'll take care of it. "

When I got over there, Mrs. Jones was flustering around a stocky, middle-aged man who was fooling with something on the wrapping counter. It was a duplicator. He was trying to balance another on one of the pans. It kept tipping until he got a pencil fixed under the pan as a prop. He stepped back a little. "Presto chango, abracadabra," he said, and pushed the button. The duplicator settled back on its base with a thump. There were now three of them-the original and one on each pan. The pencil fell away and, rolled slowly off the counter. In the flesh, so to speak, it was a much more impressive operation than on TV.

He took one off, readjusted the pencil, and made another.

"You're the manager?" he asked me.

I nodded.

"How much?" He jerked his head at the two duplicators on the counter.

"I'm not sure I understand," I said cautiously. "You mean, you want to sell them to the store?"

"I do, indeed." He put the two original duplicators back in a cardboard carton and tucked in the flaps. "Come, come, I'm a busy man this morning. What have you got in the till there?" It could be a con game, of course. Some sort of electronic flimflammy on the TV, and a confederate going down the street working sleight of hand in the business places- But, no, Mr. Brown had been getting it at home, too. Besides, it didn't smell like a con game. I rang "No Sale," took out the bills, and counted them-ninety-three dollars. I had guessed wrong bigger than that a lot of times before. I laid the money on the counter.

"O.K., bud, you're in business," the man said. He picked up the money and carton, turned and shoved through the crowd of employees and customers. No one paid him any attention. They were too busy staring at the duplicators.

I picked one up and looked at it. It weighed about fifteen pounds, just a black metal box with some plumbing at the top supporting the two pans, and a button to push. Under the button was the tag with simple instructions: " When you push the button, any object placed on one pan will be duplicated on the other," and then the warning Mr. Brown had read to me. A nice piece of merchandise, no doubt about it.

"-I'll give you two hundred for them," one of the customers said impulsively.

"Just a moment, please," I told him. I adjusted one duplicator on the pan of the other as I had seen the demonstrator do, pushed the button and held my breath. It worked.

"Here you are, sir," I said. "The price will be \$19.98. Mrs. Jones, take the sale, please." I made several more, checking the action. There was nothing to it.

Push the button, take one off, push the button again. By steadying the machine with your hand, you could get away from the pencil business.

The clerk from the next counter had been standing at my elbow, watching breathlessly. "Do you

see how it's done?" I asked her. "You do? Good. Would you operate the machine, now? Just keep taking them off and pushing the button."

I looked around and saw the floor supervisor in the crowd. "Sam, get a couple of your people and clear off those blouses by the door. Handle the sales from there, no wrapping, cash and carry, \$19.98 each, one to the customer. We'll use this counter to make them."

"Ah," a sardonic voice said at my side. "Business as usual, eh, while Rome bums. " I knew the voice, as well as the style. Both belonged to George Beedle, our personnel manager. In the old days, before Dr. Elton Mayo invented Human Relations, personnel men were people who made out hire and fire slips, worked up wage rates and job qualifications, so forth. Now they are doctors of philosophy, fully prepared to instruct operating officers in the fine points of practical psychology, sociology, economics, epistemology, and the Sermon on the Mount. I enjoy arguing with George, it's amazing how erudite a person can be without having the slightest grasp of merchandising, but not when I have work to do.

"Go away, George," I said firmly. "I'm busy now."

He looked at me curiously. "Busy at what? Making money for Brown's? Here, let me show you how to do it the easy way."

He found a ten-dollar bill in his wallet, laid it on the pan of a duplicator. With his left forefinger, he pressed the button. As another ten-dollar bill appeared, he flipped it off the pan with his right forefinger, pressed again, flipped again. "I often wonder," he said dreamily, "what the vintners buy-" press, flip, press, flip, press, flip. The air was full of ten-dollar bills.

Two or three people started scrambling for them. The rest just stared.

I must confess I was flabbergasted, myself. This potentiality of the duplicator just had not occurred to me. Goods, yes, everybody makes goods, but only the government makes money--or perhaps I should say, used to make money.

"The marketplace, John," George said--press, flip, press, flip "that's your little Republican tin god, and the lifeblood of the marketplace is money. What price money now?" He picked up one of the bills, creased it, touched his lighter to it, and lit a cigarette. "Good kindling, I suppose, if you have a fireplace."

"Uh, yes," I said. I pulled myself together. He was wrong, of course, in a general sense.

About ten-dollar bills, though, he was obviously right as rain. It was a dirty shame, just when we had an item as hot as these duplicators to move; but there it was. In the retail trade, you learn not to argue with facts or waste time in vain regrets. I caught Sam's eye and motioned him over. "No cash sales," I told him. "None whatever, personal checks only."

"Checks can be duplicated, too," George reminded me, but he looked a little uncertain.

"What for?" I said. "A check isn't legal tender, it's a specific order from a specific person to transfer credit in a specific way. I don't need a duplicator, I can write all the bad checks I want without one."

"Oh," George said.

I had been thinking while I was talking. A lot of those people look like the kind who might not have checking accounts.

"Wait a minute, Sam," I said. "If they can't write a check, open a credit account for them. The main thing is, keep the merchandise moving. These duplicators are hot now, but they'll be dead as Moses tomorrow. "

"Right, Mr. Thomas, gotcha," Sam said. He hurried back to his counter. I called up the Credit Department and made arrangements to handle the accounts. "If they've got a home address and a job," I said, "that's good enough. Get their signature and give them the merchandise. "

George was still standing there, he had got back his normal self assurance, a superior smirk on his face--the intellectual sophisticate, no Babbitt he, even if crass mercantile ventures did pay his salary. Sometimes George irritates me just a little.

"Well?" I said.

"Nothing," he murmured, "nothing at all. Just marveling at the business mind in operation. It's so beautifully oblivious. Here's a gadget that spells the absolute destruction of our economy. Are you worried? Only about how to make a fast buck spreading the plague."

There must have been two hundred customers milling around in Ladies' Wear now, the word had spread fast. The duplicators were coming in a steady stream from the wrapping counter. Two girls from the Credit Department had just stepped out of the elevator and were hurrying over with big stacks of contracts under their arms. "That's what I get paid for," I told George, "moving merchandise. Other people get paid for worrying about the social implications."

"Exactly. And someone has been worrying about them. You read that tag, didn't you?"

"I read it," I admitted. "So what? With all the button pushing going on today, the few thousand I push won't make a bit of difference."

"It will make a difference. You just haven't stopped to think why that warning is there. Take

a minute and stop thinking about these things as just a gadget people will pay twenty bucks for, think about what they can do. What happens to United States Steel when railroads can turn out all the rails they need, right on the ties ready to be spiked down, with a duplicator on a handcar? For that matter, what happens to the railroads when people can make their heavy freight on the spot, out of nothing, and don't have to move it from one end of the country to the other? What happens to General Motors when anybody who wants a new Chevy can borrow the neighbor's and make himself one? What happens to Westinghouse when Mrs. Jones can wander into Brown's with her duplicator under her arm, pick a new toaster off the counter and set it on the pan, walk out thirty seconds later with one of her own? If Westinghouse's troubles don't touch you, what happens to Brown's when she can do that? What happens-" I didn't wait to hear anymore. There's no getting around it, George does have a vivid way of putting things. I could see now he was right, I hadn't been thinking about this thing, just reacting. There was a phone at the next counter. "Connie," I said, "get me a conference hookup immediately, all department heads." My tone must have hinted that when I said immediately, I meant right now. The call chimes were already beginning to sound as I hung up. The first customers had begun to get their duplicators. Most were hurrying out of the store, but a few lingered, eyeing merchandise speculatively. One woman with an avaricious glint in her eye and a purposeful swing to her heavy body elbowed through them and came toward a rack of expensive cocktail gowns. "George!" I said. "Watch the phone!" By the time I got there, she had picked a rather gaudy sample from the rack and was folding it to lay on the pan of her

duplicator. I reached over her shoulder and picked it off before she could push the button. "I'm sorry, madam," I said firmly. "We cannot allow customers to duplicate merchandise." She glared at me belligerently. "Who says so?"

"The law says so." Possibly this was not exactly true, but I did not give her time to think about it. "You are interested in this gown, madam?" I said. "Allow me." I put the dress back on the pan and pushed the button. "There you are," I said. I glanced at the price tag-\$98.75. "The price is one dollar and ninety-eight cents. You have your credit card?" She nodded uncertainly, looking shaken but not entirely convinced. "Possibly," I said, "you'd like a few more at this very low price." I went down the rack, picking half a dozen at random and duplicating them. "If you find any that don't suit you, just mail them back, we'll give you full credit. Now, perhaps, a nice synthetic pseudomarten jacket, a beautiful syntho-silk bag, all at the same phenomenal discount, absolutely no down payment, you do not owe us one red cent until the first of next month."

The saleswoman was standing there helplessly, her mouth open. "I'll bill it," I told her shortly. "You start wrapping the merchandise." It made several nice bulky packages, very hard to manage while holding the duplicator too. "There you are, madam," I said, assisting her toward the door, "and remember, this sale isn't just for today, every item Brown's sells can be duplicated for similar amazingly low prices, you need not even bring your own duplicator, we will have one on every counter for your convenience."

I brushed past Sam on the way. "Get those people with duplicators moving out of here," I said, "drag counters around, block off the aisles, get a guard at the other doors. No one allowed in the store with duplicators. Then get duplicators around to each department as fast as you can, grab anybody you need to help you."

I got back to George and found him holding the phone. "They're all on," he said.

"Thank you, George." I picked up the phone.

"I suppose you've all had the word on these duplicators," I said. "Is there anyone who hasn't?" No one spoke. "O.K., now here's what we've been doing down here on the first floor-" I outlined what had happened. "Up to now," I said, "it's all been emergency action,

off the cuff. Let's see if we can't get things a little better organized, get ahead of it. Any suggestions?"

"On this credit deal," Markov said, "the way we're writing them up, most of these people are white card, a few pink. If there's much trade, we're going to-be swamped up here trying to check accounts. How about that?"

"Give them all blue-card treatment for today," I said. "We can get back into the routine when things settle down." At Brown's, a blue card is just like cash, only quicker, no restrictions on credit. All the customer has to do is show the card, the salesperson gets the account number on the slip, and that's that.

"O.K., but is anyone's credit any good, really, if we don't have money?"

"We haven't had money since 1933," I told him. "Those green paper slips you carry around in your billfold are just credit tokens, to simplify the bookkeeping. Am I right, Joslyn?"

"More or less," Joslyn in Accounting said. "Close enough for our purposes, anyway. Now, about

that ninety-eight percent markdown you put on Ladies' Wear, it may work there; but how about other lines, especially under-a-dollar items. Can we sell a ten-cent article for two mills? And what about nonduplicable merchandise? You can't set a five-hundred-pound refrigerator on that pan." With the duplicator, of course, we didn't have to worry about original cost of duplicable items, that was nil. We still had overhead, though, and in modern retailing you don't operate on a fixed markup. Brown's had about a hundred thousand dollars worth of electronic calculating machinery to figure exact markup on each item, based on running inventory, actual departmental overhead, warehouse handling costs, amortization of fixtures, a dozen other factors.

"What about this," I said, "a sliding markoff from ninety percent on cheaper articles to ninety-nine percent on big stuff, where duplicable. On the nonduplicable items, our price is straight ten percent of the price tag. What we want to remember is, these items may not be duplicable today, but they will be tomorrow, just as soon as somebody builds a bigger duplicator, and we have to clear out stock. If we can end up today with just one sample of everything we sell on the floor, and the warehouses bone-empty, that will be just right. With the duplicator, that's all we need to stay in business. "

I could almost hear the wheels whirring in Joslyn's head, they make exactly the same sound as an IBM comptometer. "I'll buy it," he said finally, "as a temporary measure to move the stuff, pending calculation. I suppose you do want me to throw out the old cards, start calculating new prices from scratch?"

"That's exactly what I want. Now, who's next?"

Toivo in Personnel, the man who does George's work while George is busy philosophizing, was. He wanted to know what the policy would be on employee discount on duplicators.

"No duplicator sales to employees," I told him. "Each employee will get one free, compliments of Brown's. 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox-' On the other hand, you don't have to keep the feed box unlocked for him, either. They'll get the duplicators as they go home tonight, and they won't be allowed to bring them back into the store."

After that, Sam had a question about the instruction tags on the duplicators---he was not a department head, of course, but I had got him in on the roundup because he was in charge on the firing line. "Hadn't we ought to paint over that warning, or something?" he asked. "It's not a very good selling point."

"Have you lost any sales on it yet?" I asked.

"Well, no," he said.

"I think you'd better let it stand, then. There could be a point of liability involved if we removed it. This way, it's up to the buyer, he's been warned. "

I won't say we settled all the problems the duplicator posed in half an hour, but we made a good running start.

"All very fine," George said as I hung up and mopped my face with a cashmere cardigan from the counter, "but what are you going to do about the mobs?"

"Mobs? What mobs!"

"Mobs," George said firmly. "You may not think that warning is important, but a lot of people do. They're worried about what's going to happen when the foundations are chipped away. So-let's get ours now, devil take the hindmost. I'm not just guessing about this, incidentally, I've been watching the TV while you were talking. Most of the trouble is still downtown, but it's coming this way. What do you intend to do about it?"

There was not a lot I could do. It's not a subject you hear discussed at retail conventions, but mob action is one of those things anyone

with large areas of plate glass fronting on a busy thoroughfare thinks about now and then-usually on those gloomy occasions when you wake up at three-thirty in the morning and can't get back to sleep. In my own case, I had long ago decided on a basic principle: You can't fight it, so treat it like any other act of God, button up and ride with it. Luckily, we had stripped all the other departments to the bone to give a flying reserve on the first floor to handle contingencies. They were beginning to show up now, and I put them right to work.

"Clear out the windows," I said, "get it all out, don't leave even a necktie. How are those signs coming?" I had already put a crew to work on a collection of big signs and banners-"YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD-AT BROWN'S"; "99% OFF-ALL ITEMS-UP TO 99% OFF"; "DUPLICATORS,. \$19.98, NO DOWN PAYMENT, YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD AT BROWN'S"; "GIGANTIC STOCK CLEARANCE, UP TO 99% OFF--not very subtle, but the way I had it sized up, this was not a time for subtlety. We could whet down the rough edges later, the thing now was to keep moving.

"Get those signs in the windows," I said. "Fast. We don't want anything in there to catch a looter's eye, just the bargain hunters."

Markov was down on the first floor now. I called him over. "What's the absolute minimum for one of your girls to make up a contract and fill out a credit card?" I asked him.

"Those girls on the duplicators have got it down to about two minutes, now," he said.

"Not good enough. From now on, I don't want a person coming in this store without a credit card. There'll be a lot coming, and they won't be in a mood to stand in line. If you have to, just get their names and addresses and a signature. What we want to do is slow them up just a little as they come in the entrance, without building up too much pressure. That way, the wilder ones can zip by up the street while we bleed off the slower-moving element, where our customers will be. Can you do it?"

Markov looked thoughtful. "I think so. We'll block off the entrances back about ten feet. That will leave a nice little wad of about fifty or so to slow things down. We'll move them on in through four aisles with two girls writing contracts at each aisle. Just getting minimum credit information like you say, I think we can move about eight hundred per hour per entrance."

"Sounds good," I said. "Get moving on it."

I got the floor supervisors together next and told them what we expected. "When the rush comes," I told them, "just get their credit card number and get the merchandise on a slip. Move everything you can, but don't waste time and don't get in any arguments. If anyone gets balky, load him down with merchandise and shove him out. If we let these people get out of hand once, we've had it."

"If it's going to be that bad, Mr. Thomas," Sansom from the Bootery said, "why don't we just lock up for today?"

"For two reasons: First, if we just lock up and go home, they can still break the locks, and we've got no one here to control things. The second reason is, we're not here just for fun, we're here to sell goods."

"Now, are there any other questions?"

There were several about technical aspects of handling the crowds, and we settled them in a hurry, because things were getting ready to pop. There was a commotion outside, and a dozen or so men jammed in the south entrance all at once. They stood there for a moment and looked uncertainly around. Before they had a chance to get their bearings, Markov was hustling them over to his account clerks. A good man, Markov, he was really out of place in Credit, he should have been on the floor.

Two of the customers had duplicators, and they were not about to check them. I saw my "no duplicator" rule was not going to work today. "Forget it," I told the clerks. "Just try to keep track of the merchandise and get on a slip."

By the time Markov had the first group checked through and turned loose with their bright new credit cards in their hands, every entrance was plugged. Luckily for us, the jewelry store two doors down hadn't got the word in time, or perhaps they just did not think fast enough. The more aggressive went past our windows full of sale signs, their eyes on the jewelry and knickknacks, and the meeker were crowded off into Brown's. In any group like this, there is always a small percentage of actively antisocial individuals and a large number who are just there, with no very sharp understanding of why. After the first few minutes of excitement, most of these latter were wishing they were home. While Brown's was not exactly home, it was comparatively homey. We got a few hoodlums, but they were watered down to where we could handle them. The rest were just people, a little more worked up than usual, but still customers.

I won't say we didn't have excitement, because we did. Anytime

you get three or four thousand people milling around in a store, you are going to have excitement.

Brown's has a liquor department, on the fourth floor, where it is not conspicuous. What we want is the case-lot trade, not the after-closing half-pint customer. In spite of this, a few of the rowdier element did find their way to it. I got a trouble call a little after one. A redheaded fellow was back of the counter, tossing bottles to the crowd. "Here y'are, Mac," he said as I pushed up to the counter. "Have one on Brown's, good old Brown's." He shoved a bottle of Black Label at me.

"Right," I said. I smashed the neck off on the counter edge. "Cheers," I said, and tipped it up.

The redhead stared at me. "Careful, bud," he said. "You'll cut your tongue, I did once, trying that."

"The way to do it," I explained. "You hold your hand tight around the neck and let the whiskey run over your thumb." I showed him. "Here, you have one." I grabbed another bottle, smashed the neck off, and handed it to him. He tried it, gingerly.

"No, not like that," I said impatiently, "just shove your lip against your thumb, tip 'er up, let 'er go down. Like this." The nice thing about this is, by careful manipulation of your thumb you can seem to be taking a hefty swig, though actually drinking very little. I learned

how in my younger days, while temporarily employed by the government in the retail blood-and-guts trade, through carefully observing my platoon sergeant. He had a reputation as a rough fast drinker, but always ended the evening on his own feet.

"This stuff is no good, anyway," I said. "These square bottles don't give you a grip. Hand me a couple of those Lemon Hart. " I broke the necks and gave him one. "Mud in your eye." A hand reached past me for the bottle I had set down. I chopped at it and the man behind me yelped. "Buy your own whiskey," I said coldly. "Here, you," I told one of the clerks, "this man wants a bottle of Scotch. Get on the ball, start serving the customers."

Redhead already had a pretty good glow on when I got there, and Lemon Hart is 151 proof. By the time he had mastered the trick of drinking out of a broken bottle, I judged he was not in shape to bother us anymore. "Get his credit card and bill him for two Black Label Scotch, two Lemon Hart rum, plus whatever else he handed out," I said. "Then have the store police tuck him away."

These things are not hard to handle, if you move in fast and keep jabbing. The basic principle is: Never react as the other fellow expects you to, let him worry about what you are going to do, rather than vice versa. And, of course, keep your eye on the objective, which in our case is to sell merchandise. It's surprising how few salespeople nowadays can seem to get that through their heads. They let the customer take the initiative. Once you do that, you are licked. You are not selling then, you are buying, regardless of which way the money goes.

I had occasion to think about this several times that afternoon. The young people we had on the floor could go through the motions, but they weren't really selling. I got another SOS, for example, from Sporting Goods.

"This gentleman wants to buy a pistol, but he doesn't have a permit," the salesman said nervously. A tall cadaverous individual was standing by the counter.

"Here's my permit," the man grated. He turned toward me. I found myself looking into the muzzle of a .30 Luger. "Now I want bullets, and quick."

"I see," I said. I noticed the safety was on. I glanced at the counter. There was no open box of ammunition. We do not, of course, keep loaded pistols in stock. "Just what do you wish to use the pistol for, sir," I asked him. "Target, sport, or . . . uh . . . defense?"

"To shoot people with," the man said grimly. "From now on, there is no law, it's survival of the fittest. I intend to survive."

"In that case," I said, "might I suggest a somewhat more advanced I weapon? Son, reach me one of those Stens from up over the rack, please. "

"No false moves!" the man warned harshly. "I have you both covered! "

"Right," I agreed. "No false moves. There you are, sir, a genuine Sten, the submachine gun favored by British commandoes in World War 11. One of the most reliable and fastest firing hand weapons ever designed." I worked the action a few times and showed him how to release and insert the magazine. As I did so, I smeared the price tag with my thumb. "Only \$179.50, sir," I said, "complete with two fully loaded magazines, guaranteed to comply with pertinent provisions of the Federal Firearms Act." He picked it up eagerly, his eyes shining like a four-year-old who has just seen Wyatt Earp's Ned Buntline Special hanging on the Christmas tree.

"Now," I said, "if I could have your credit card, please, while the clerk gets your ammunition-get out a dozen boxes of that .38 Short back on the lower right-hand shelf, please, the stuff in the green boxes with the white trademark." I got the account number and began writing up the sale. "You'll need something to carry the ammunition and other gear, of course. How about one of our new Everest Assault Paks, crafted after those used by Tensing Norkay and Sir Edmund Hillary in the conquest of Everest? And a holster for the pistol, we have a beautiful item here by Lawrence, specially designed for quick draw from any position-" "Wasn't that just a little, uh, unethical?" the clerk asked as we watched the man swagger out, his Everest Assault Pak dragging heavily at his narrow shoulders, the hand-tooled Lawrence holster bulking on his hip, the Sten under his arm.

"Under ordinary circumstances," I admitted, "yes. Today, no. We're required by law to disable those Stens, but we're not required to tell the customer just what we did to them, he's supposed to know the law himself. If we had given that fellow a gun that would shoot, or ammo to fit that pistol, he'd be dead in half an hour, and he might hurt someone else, too. This way, he'll be picked up in ten minutes, no damage done, no one hurt, I don't think we'll even be gigged on selling that pistol without a permit. If we are, we've got a hundred and sixty extra on the Sten to help pay the fine, that's our fee for taking the chance.

"Now, one more thing. When things settle down again, remind me to give you a few pointers on tie-in sales and knowing your merchandise, not to mention showing initiative in dealing with customers. Jobs may be hard to get, son, when this duplicator really starts working."

Well, the boy could take a hint, you have to give him that. For the rest of the day there was a pretty steady stream of people leaving Sporting Goods with Stens under their arms and Everest Assault Paks on their backs. I had to send three more people over to help him, and when I checked a little later he had moved all the old ammunition, some of it dating back to the -time I had been in Sporting Goods myself-not at any ninety-nine percent discount, either. On guns and

ammunition we were sticking to straight list, except for the one thousand percent markup on the Stens, which he had kept.

It didn't make any difference to the customers. They were people who took seriously that business about foundation chipping, and they were all convinced Times Square would be a jungle tomorrow professorial types mostly, like the fellow with the Luger. I have noticed before that people who have the most faith in the efficacy of shooting other people often seem to be those who have not tried it often.

Finally, about ten in the evening, the National Guard moved in, and we were able to close up. By that time, the first shock was over, people were getting used to the duplicator. Their eyes no longer popped when the duplicate appeared out of thin air, easy terms and low prices were not such a novelty anymore, they were beginning to pick and choose.

No one had been able to figure out how the duplicating effect was generated, but the engineers had found it was transmitted to the pans over a simple metallic circuit. With that much known, larger duplicators were obviously feasible. As soon as we were sure of this, we had got out wires to our suppliers canceling all current orders-tough on them, no doubt, but we weren't in business for our health.

Back in the receiving warehouse, our building maintenance crew had already got a big duplicator working, just the works from a small one coupled to two big aluminum sheets. They were making TV sets when I went back to check after closing the store-for some reason there had been a big run on TVs, you would think everyone already had one, but apparently not. One man was pushing the button and two more were picking them off with forklifts and running them over to a stack against the wall.

It seemed to me they were getting a little too enthusiastic about it. I wanted some inventory on heavy stuff, just enough so we didn't have to run our model back and make one every time we sold a store or daveno, the small articles we could make right at the counter as we sold them; but until things settled down I didn't want a big stock.

"O.K., boys," I told them. "You can close up now and go home. There's a pile of duplicators by the door, take one as you go out. Take a couple for the kids, too, if you'd like. " I had decided to drop the one-to-a-customer rule. We had sold over two thousand that day at

twenty dollars, another twelve or fifteen hundred at prices down to five dollars, but toward the end of the day we couldn't keep them moving even at a dollar fifty. Tomorrow, they'd be breakfast food prizes.

I went back up front. The store was a mess, but the counters and shelves all had a lovely bare look and the stock runners were still hauling bale after bale of contracts over to the elevators. I felt pretty good about it.

We had turned the coffee shop over to the military for a command post, I was still not entirely easy about vandalism. George was there, sitting at the coffee-smearred counter with a second lieutenant. Walkie-talkies, field rations, and miscellaneous gear were piled on the tables. A sergeant was reading comic books from the rack by the door and a couple of Guardsmen were sleeping in booths. It looked very homey and quiet.

"Ah," George said, "the man with the ball-point pen, bowed by the weight of three and a quarter percent he stands, say what immortal hand or eye, framed thy fearful symmetry. Sit down, John, have a cup of coffee. Lieutenant Simond, Mr. Thomas. You and the lieutenant should get along, John, he's another merchant prince, from the supermarket in the next block."

Simond blushed, a nice-looking crew-cut young fellow. George is a little disconcerting, when you don't know him well, and he seemed rather above himself tonight. In fact, for a man who had put in a big day--even George had been working toward the last-he seemed somewhat too jovial. I looked at him closely.

"That's right, John," he said cheerfully. "At the end of the day's occupation, when the world looks rancid and sour, comes that pause for a soothing libation, which is known as the 'cocktail hour. ' " He pulled a bottle from his pocket. "Here, put some of this in your coffee, you'll feel better. "

"Thank you, George," I said. The bottle in the bottom file drawer is not a custom at Brown's, I don't believe in drinking in the store and George knows it; but there is a time and place for making an issue of rules, and there is a time and place for not doing so.

George lifted his cup. "To Western Civilization," he said, "drowned by the mill that ground out salt. Skoal!"

"Oh, now-" I said.

"Oh, now, yourself, John. Let's not kid ourselves, just because it

takes a day or two for the machinery to fall apart. You've kept on top so far by moving fast and taking advantage of the mob's stupidity. The fact still remains, this machine makes every man self-sufficient, it takes the stickum right out of society. Pretty soon, people are going to get wise to that. Who's going to buy your gadgets then, who's going to buy beans from Lieutenant Simond here when they can drop a jar of caviar on the pan and, presto-" He made a motion of jabbing a button.

"Well, let's wait and see," I said. "It may not be quite so bad as you think."

"It's worse than I think," George said stubbornly.

I shrugged and sipped at my coffee. I didn't believe it, there have always been merchants, ever since the Stone Age, come war, revolution, or cataclysm, people have bought and sold. Still, it's hard to argue with logic.

Simond cleared his throat. "Not to change the subject," he said, "but about that bean business Mr. Beedle mentioned-- He paused diffidently.

"Yes?" I said. As far as I was concerned, a new subject was welcome. The comfortable satisfaction I had felt when I sat down was all gone. George often does that to me. "What about beans?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it, he's right, you know, not very many people will buy beans and chuck roast, when they can eat wild rice and smoked pheasant breast. So, you know what I've been thinking? I think what we'll have to have, instead of a supermarket, is a sort of super-delicatessen. Just one item each of every fancy food from all over the world, thousands and thousands, all different--"

"It won't work," George said with weary kindness. "That's what I've just been explaining to John here. Why should I buy my pickled hummingbird tongues from you, when I can keep a can on my own shelf and duplicate it ad nauseam?"

"Ad nauseam, that's why," Simond said earnestly. "Beans you can eat every day. Pickled hummingbird tongues, you can't. You know when we first started selling these frozen TV dinners, we ran into something funny. The first couple of weeks, they'd go like crazy. Then they'd die. We'd change suppliers, same story. Hot, then cold. Finally, somebody got an idea. You take the Mexican dinner, that's a good seller, I like it myself. You taste the first one, it's delicious. The

next, not quite so good. The third or fourth one., eating's a chore, and by the tenth you can't stand the sight of even the wrapper--"

C rations," I put in.

"That's it, same thing. The trouble is, each one is as exactly like the other as they can be made. You eat one, you've had them all. So, we passed the word to our supplier. Now, he changes the formula every week, a little more pepper, a few less beans, a different cut of meat, so forth. People think they are getting the same thing, but it's just enough different to keep them coming back for more."

"I see what you mean," I said thoughtfully. "In the past, we've sold standardization because it was a scarce commodity. Now, the shoe is on the other foot, we'll sell diversity. Instead of offering the customer a choice of GE or Westinghouse refrigerator, we'll offer a choice of any refrigerator built, anywhere--" A sudden thought struck me. "Damn it," I said unhappily.

"We still can't get away from our suppliers. "

"Not only that," George offered helpfully. "Those samples you're going to offer a choice of are practically all going to be handmade models, remember that. Also, you're not going to get away with duplicating them for nothing. I think you already broke the law when you duplicated the trademarks on those cartons. Even if you didn't, it's not going to take much extension of present legislation to make it illegal to copy any manufactured article without paying royalty."

How right he was. I was way ahead of him. The whole picture was beginning to firm up in my mind now, and I was not very happy at what I thought I saw.

I looked at my watch. "Turn on that TV, please, George," I said. "It's time for the late news."

". . . Ana that's the situation with regard to the duplicator, the biggest news in the world today," the announcer said. "Now, for a quick rundown of expert opinion, how the duplicator will affect you and me in the days ahead. First to Detroit, Mr. William Peterkin . . ."

11. . . Mr. Peterkin, what, in your opinion, will be the single most noticeable effect of the

duplicator on the auto industry?"

Mr. Peterkin looked bloodshot and haggard, it was obvious that he had put in a busy day, too.

"Well, I should say elimination of our dependence on expensive

tooling and assembly lines. We have a lot of things on the drawing boards—fuel injection, interesting ideas in body design, electronic shifting, even a sort of, you might say, 'electronic chauffeur,' to remember previously traveled routes and drive them for you—all sorts of things that haven't been put on the market because of production difficulties. Now, well, all I can say is, watch the news for the next few months. Suddenly it's going to be, not 1960, but about 2160.

"How about employment, Mr. Peterkin? A lot of people have been worrying about their jobs. How does that look in your industry?"

"That's kind of a funny thing. You know, when we first got the word about this thing, this duplicator, we immediately started thinking in terms of pretty drastic retrenchment. Then, when we got down to cases and started figuring what to cut, where, it turned out we didn't have much fat to spare. Engineers, draftsmen, designers; we need about six times as many as we have. Nut-twirlers and button-pushers on assembly lines will go; but mechanics, craftsmen who can take a blueprint and turn out a piece to specified tolerance . . . well, we can't get them from other industries, they're in the same boat, so it looks like we'll go into a big training program immediately, coupled with a heavy recruiting drive—"

"Great," I said. "There goes our help, just like wartime. We can't compete when they're offering Rosie the Salesgirl four bucks an hour to be Rosie the Riveter."

". . . And now," the announcer said, "Washington, the Department of Commerce--"

". . . The outlook for all forms of surface transport, and certain categories of air transport, is fluid. It has not yet been determined if the duplication effect can be extended over metallic or wireless circuits for any distance. Should remote duplication prove feasible, rolling stock and roadbeds, trucks and barges, will become obsolete. Increases forecast in total tonnages moved, however, may require marked expansion of terminal facilities--"

Wall Street--

"After a heavy selling wave, industrials and utilities recovered surprisingly by closing time--"

". . . Treasury's abrupt withdrawal of all legal tender. While the duplicator can help ease tremendous task of expanding and modernizing banking's physical plant, there simply are not enough people--"

"You get the picture?" I said. "The same old rat race, only twice as furious. We've been running like mad all day, just to get back to where we were."

George shook his head slowly. "You're wrong, John. Not back to where we were. This morning, we had an economy of scarcity. Tonight, we have an economy of abundance. This morning, we had a money economy—it was a money economy, even if credit was important. Tonight, it's a credit economy, one hundred percent. This morning, you and the lieutenant were selling standardization. Tonight, it's diversity.

"The whole framework of our society is flipped upside down." He frowned uncertainly. "And yet, you're right too, it doesn't seem to make much difference, it is still the same old rat race. I don't understand it. "

"Well, maybe the framework is just not so important as you thought, George," I said. "Anyway, you puzzle about it. I haven't got time, right now. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day, and probably the next several after it." I finished my coffee and stood up. "If you fellows will excuse me, I'm going home to bed."

And that was the first day of the duplicator, the day that set the pattern.