THE PERFUMER'S TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

BY J. R. ELLIOTT

Don't Shoot the Poor Piano Player—He Is Doing the Best He Can, was a rather facetious sign posted in the old-time saloons of our Wild Western era. If it did not prevent gunplay, it at least focused sympathetic attention on the unfortunate musician.

Change the locale to the present, substitute "perfumer" for "piano player" and the old motto symbolizes the difficulties under which the modern perfumer works. The poor perfumer must face a constant barrage of criticism from all sides. Much of this is due to the failure of others to comprehend the complexity and aggravating nature of his problems.

Unhappily, many regard the perfumer as peculiarly talented, a somewhat eccentric genius with a quasi-magical touch, who can pull fragrances out of a bottle (at almost any price) with the ease of the old-time magician manipulating rabbits from a hat. Others not quite so charitable picture him as an absent-minded individual walking around the room waving a test paper under his nose like a donkey constantly tempted into action by that carrot on the end of a stick. Neither view could be further from the truth.

The perfumer is an average individual with a good memory for odors, coupled with an active imagination, both skills being gained only after a long and arduous apprenticeship. He is not a miracle worker, and makes no pretense of being one. He has a host of artistic and technical problems, some of which can be as exasperatingly tantalizing to him as the unobtainable carrot must be to the poor donkey. Only the few who realize the intricacies of the perfumer's work are able to appreciate him.

The changing status of raw material sources since World War II constitutes one of the perfumer's greatest headaches. That War violently shifted the areas of production, as well as the methods of preparation. Sociological changes in these same areas have increased labor costs, which are reflected in the higher prices of finished raw materials.

Vetyvert, for example, has spread out widely. Vetyvert Haiti, formerly unkown, is now a competitor in the field. Its fragrance is different from the traditional vetyvert Bourbon, yet it has certain qualities which make it more attractive in some fragrances. Geranium production, once limited to the Mediterranean area, has similarly spread out over Africa and parts of tropical Asia. There are many excellent geranium oils, but each has its individuality, and the modern perfume must know how to adapt himself to these special properties. Petitgrain production has expanded in South America and in a few African locations, but, sadly, the quality has not been improved. The perfumer must make himself constantly familiar with all these changes in source and quality, and learn how to compensate for them in formulations.

Highly attractive synthetics have entered the market in competition with products formerly isolated from natural oils. Linalool is now prepared by a direct synthesis, instead of from wood distillation in South American jungles. A new type of linalool now comes from a South American source. Citronellol is being derived from turpentine instead of Asiatic citronellal grass.

These are only a few of the upheavals that have occurred in our industry. Each new product has its own merits, its marketing problems, price, stability, and purity. The present day perfumer must select his sources from among this variety with the objective of a particular odor effect, a special price requirement, or a specific supply problem. His position is almost as complicated as that of the stockbroker when asked to establish a portfolio for a client—he has to be right all the time or his job may be in jeopardy. The responsibility for his decisions rests squarely on his shoulders. He has little or no control over all these changes or technical evolutions. Like the man on the stormy sea in a small boat, he must guide his course with the waves or be swamped by them. All of this creates quite a tension in the individual perfumer.

As if this weren't enough, the perfumer must keep

abreast of the continuing flow of new fragrance chemicals introduced to the market. He must evaluate them, classify them, familiarize himself with their special nuances, and then try to incorporate them in his fragrance designs to create the touch of novelty that makes things sell. Research, once considered only for chemists, is now a "must" for progressive perfumers. It has been said that a project dies when it becomes inflexible. This is certainly true of the perfume field. The moment a perfumer tends to stand still, to take things easy or for granted, he is swept aside by the onrush of progress. All this responsibility creates a subtle pressure on the perfumer which, although not visible even to his closest associates, is very great nonetheless.

The most frustrating part of any perfumer's work is the business of "matching," or "countersampling," as it has been called. This can mean anything from a meticulous copy of a fragrance to a simulation bearing only a casual resemblance. Usually this kind of

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work requires a long preparation and presentation of a series of designs before acceptance, if it is accepted at all. The percentage of successful matches is small at its best. This is not because of the perfumer's lack of talent, as is sometimes charged.

The most frequent cause of difficulty in matchwork is the requirement of too low a raw material cost, which severely limits the choice of raw materials and thus restricts the perfumer's scope. In this situation he must try to reach some kind of compromise with the customer that will permit him either to design a satisfactory product or create a variation to accomodate the special price required. This takes the patience of Job and the skill of a polished diplomat.

Another influential factor is the great difference in personal viewpoints. The perfumer may look at a fragrance in one manner, and the buyer in another. Both are sincere in their opinions. The discrepancy is caused by the human variation in their individual reactions towards odors. It is hard to reconcile these factors, but the perfumer must make a tremendous effort to understand his customer. Situations of this kind call for a direct, tactful meeting between perfumer and client. Unfortunately the policies of many companies still frown upon such positive action and require that the perfumer obtain his information indirectly through the sales department. This makes it tough for the perfumer to assess the customer's specific reaction. In fairness, however, this separation of perfumer from the ultimate customer is beginning to decline. It seems to have stemmed from the European attitude of secrecy of many years ago.

One of the important matching problems encountered is the preparation of copies, for American colognes, of the costly French fragrances. This is a strictly American "me too" operation, as the various firms make efforts to cash in on the trend of the moment, at conventional American prices. This becomes a really tough job because these French fragrances are usually very well made from excellent raw materials with a high basic cost allowance. When the American buyer insists—at an American price—on absolute perfection of detail, such a matching project can quickly become a nightmare to the perfumer and a heavy strain on his ingenuity. I often wonder if this insistence on such extreme perfection is really a benefit to either the buyer or perfumer. For the buyer, such a procedure only causes a long delay in his entry into the competitive market, thus making him a Johnny-come-lately. Business bypasses him while he waits for his perfect copy to come through. As for the perfumer, he has only esthetic satisfaction to compensate for his headaches.

There are sincere requests for matchwork stemming from the presence of too many goodies, that is, high-priced floral absolutes, in a composition. The buyer may feel that this gives a cost out of line with the showmanship of the product, and ask for a competitive match for improvement, as well as a reduction in cost.

However, this type of matchwork is declining; today's economic pressures do not allow the indiscreet use of absolutes. Nevertheless the perfumer is under constant pressure to produce something "cheap, but just as good." Although this is the bane of his existence, it is a necessary part of the business. There is a "floor" of raw material cost on every fragrance type. Below this "floor" there is no room for further price-cutting without sacrificing some part of the fragrance itself. Yet the insistence on price cuts never relaxes. When the perfumer is faced with this situation he is in a bad spot. He has only two choices: take a stand against the price request and tactfully turn down the project; or attempt to prepare a shabby version that will meet the price desired. No matter what he does, he is in for criticism. If he rejects the offer, he runs a strong risk of antagonizing the customer. A frank opinion—even if right—is rarely appreciated. If he makes the shabby version, he risks damaging the customer's business prospects. The perfumer is caught in the middle of a most frus-

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grown with weeds. Traders brought out crocodile skins, peccary hides, bois de rose (from Peru, too) and tolu. With the new capital, Brasilia, inland, it may take a few years for any changes, but industrialization is already commencing.

Southern Brazil is still prospering from peppermint oil and menthol production introduced by immigrant Japanese farmers just prior to World War II. Ocotea —for safrol—comes from here, too. Paraguay for petitgrain oil, a placid pampas for all the problems brought on by the neighboring Peronistas.

Now back around the globe to North America and home. Industrialization has spread southward—electrification, textile mills, book printing and chemistry plants. Yet today cedar leaf oil from the Carolinas and Texas can compete with the African oil. Up in the north woods of Quebec, cedarwood grows on, and beyond the cedar forests beavers are hunted and trapped for beaver castors—prolificacy is the major problem here.

Around the Great Lakes and out west at either end of the Northwest Passage are the mint oils—as American as chewing gum—probably in constant demand far beyond the vagaries and fluctuations of farm policies.

Our industry is no less romantic today than it was in the days of clipper ships, and it's far, far more vast an industry than Captain Ahab could have imagined when he first heard of ambergris.

THE PERFUMER'S TRIALS

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trating situation. Is it any wonder that the perfumer's laboratory has been nicknamed "Ulcer Gulch," and not facetiously?

To complicate matters further, the perfumer must now contend with the added factor of competition from Europe. Low labor costs and low raw material costs, especially in essential oils, permit the European perfumer to enjoy a decided edge over his American confrere. The European perfumer can create a more artistically satisfactory and attractive design than his American counterpart, simply because of the price differential. But let the American try to explain this situation to anyone who will listen, and see how little sympathy he will receive. The general attitude seems to be that an American perfumer is a genius of the kind who will perform only under great tension and anxiety. And does he get both ! ! !

To add further to the perfumer's woes, a great shift in public taste is taking place, and we are now in a static period prior to great changes. The allegedly good old days when a piece of mediocrity could be put in a fancy bottle and shoved down the public's throat with a tough, tub-thumping campaign of advertising are gone forever. The public is increasingly discerning of the contents of this same bottle, as witness the sales quandary of some of the recently in-

troduced fragrances. The public is ready to buy something above average, but many of the sellers are unsure and cling to the thinking and low prices of 20 years ago. This circumstance puts the perfumer right in the middle of a bitter controversy. Rising raw material costs squeeze him on the one hand. Skyrocketting labor costs are reflected in his mark-up requirements and hurt just as much as material costs. The poor fellow is trapped in this mess. No matter what he does, he can't win. He has to take criticism from every side. The going is rough on him, especially because he has no control over the situation and cannot exert even a moderating influence.

However, he has one consolation. What the public wants, it usually gets—come hell or high water. If folks want better fragrances they will get them, despite the arguments and groans that are presently being advanced. And with a change in the selling price structure, a load will ultimately be taken off the perfumer's back.

New methods for dispensing fragrance have piled additional problems on the perfumer. For a while, the popularity of the solid colognes created a series of technical difficulties almost as complicated as the former insistance on pure white perfumed soap. But gradually these troubles were solved, although even today some fragrance types are still limited in this solid application ,and require individual study.

The increasing popularity of aerosols and their associated novelties have presented terrific problems in perfume design and technology which have not yet been entirely resolved. A good portion of this responsibility has fallen on the perfumer, since it is his judgment that creates a fragrance. The headaches involved in adapting a fragrance to an aerosol were stupendous at the beginning, requiring especially a prolonged "life" study of the various raw materials. Drastic changes in perfume techniques and aerosol equipment were needed to meet the special requirements. Probably more actual research time was applied to aerosol development than had been spent in the previous 50 years on conventional perfumery.

Cosmetics have been vastly improved in the last few years and now require the development of specialized fragrance effects appropriate to their new design. The creation of an attractive cosmetic fragrance now demands far more thought and work on the part of the perfumer than at any time in fragrance history. Then too, the testing of a cosmetic fragrance is now a long and tedious project consuming much of the perfumer's time, for technical as well as artistic purposes.

Soaps have always demanded a great deal of ingenuity and effort from the perfumer. Fragrances must be designed that will not discolor in the finished product and that are stable in odor for a specified time. Tabulations of the performance of various basic materials have been prepared with great effort and expense, but these do not always supply the answer.

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Combinations of tested, standard raw materials will give performances not in line with the individual materials. Therefore, there is no sure method of predicting the performance of any soap fragrance. The perfumer must laboriously test each new product he makes.

The design of a soap fragrance presents acute problems in the matter of price. Invariably a good part of the original "extract" fragrance type must be sacrificed in order to meet the stringent low cost of the soap product. It is exceedingly difficult for the perfumer to achieve even a passable reproduction of the desired fragrance type because of the limitations on his raw materials, which are established by the requirement of low price. It takes tremendous ingenuity and effort to create a soap fragrance of consequence that also meets both price and technical requirements.

The problems of shampoos are parallel to those of soap. Stability problems and the lasting power of the fragrance are somewhat more acute in shampoos. The emulsions of some of the lotion-shampoos are occasionally disturbed by the fragrance oil used.

Lotions sometimes present peculiar problems in the "upsetting" of a fragrance effect, because of the distribution of the fragrance oil between the oil and aqueous components. With regard to fragrance, a lotion can be regarded as an exaggerated cosmetic.

The modern detergents which are replacing soaps in many household uses, present even greater difficulties in design and odor stability. It is difficult to create a detergent fragrance that will meet the stringent cost limitations and still be stable enough to weather the long and intense "life" tests.

The difficulty of perfuming detergents is readily observed in the great number of jasmin-lilac fragrances now in use. This particular fragrance class is readily adaptable for detergents because it is frankly an inexpensive item employing a liberal quantity of the cheaper raw materials like benzyl acetate and terpineol, both of which have long records of good stability and performance in soap products.

In the last ten years, another chore has been put on the perfumer: industrial fragrances. While, in a manner of speaking, this may be considered as an extension of soap-detergent chemistry, it poses extreme problems of cost, technical compatibility, and odor performance.

It seems that the variations of projects in this new field never end—they demand more and more technical "savvy." In some firms this branch of perfumery has become so great that a complete separate laboratory section and staff are maintained to specialize in industrial applications. Often, as much chemical research as fragrance work is carried out.

The modern perfumer has only to spend many

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years in arduous apprenticeship to learn his trade; then devote more years to establishing himself as a perfumer; somewhere along the way he should acquire a chemical degree if time permits; he must develop a research temperament and an exploratory attitude; then he must face the manifold problems which we have described. As if this weren't enough, he must acquire the patience of Job and the tact of a diplomat.

Did I hear someone say the perfumer's job is easy?

HOW TO EXPORT TO EUROPE

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for one year all vouchers that apply only to U. S. production and sales. These will be the largest part of your total costs. It is obvious, for instance, that costs in connection with your representative in Texas or for entertaining a major U. S. customer should not be shared by European clients. It is also obvious that your Italian clients would prefer not to pay for your advertisement in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

I am sure that you will find this cost separation informative. When you have it, you can further analyze your profit and loss account for the actual cost that must be the basis of your export price.

The next problem is to find the person or firm to introduce your goods on the European market. Let me first state who it should *not* be. It should not be the man with whom you became acquainted in the hotel bar last time you were in Europe. Nor should it be the charming fellow your brother came to know on his last holiday in Europe. It is not even certain that you can approach uncritically a firm recommended to you by someone in your domestic field. No, it should be an organization or person with real qualifications for doing a good job for you. First, it must be someone with a thorough knowledge of your line of business. This person or firm must have good relations with the very best firms in the business in a number of countries. Such a firm or person should also have good financial standing.

Your agent must write and speak at least three or four of the most common European languages. Personal contact is more complicated in Europe than in the U. S. because of the many different languages.

Just as it is important not to overorganize your business at home, it is also important not to overorganize your European sales organization. You should require this organization to call on all your European clients at least once a year. In Europe, personal contact is even more important for good cooperation than it is in the U. S.

Most important, this organization must always provide your agents in the various countries with sales stimulation. This should come largely from you in the U. S., and then be distributed by your Euro-