

# MERCHANT PRINCES

*An Intimate History of  
Jewish Families Who Built  
Great Department Stores*

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HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS  
New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London

episode, invariably snorting his ultimate expression of contempt: "Kindergarten! Waving a red flag at a bull—it's *Kindergarten* stuff."

Helping in his father's store, the boy observed the contrast between the rich women, who bought quickly and lavishly or refused to buy because the merchandise was "not fine enough," and the poor wives of the workingmen, who held a bolt of cheap goods for an intolerably long time, turning it over and over, wondering not about its quality so much as whether this pitifully tiny expenditure might later mean too little money for food or rent or medicine.

In Lynn, William Filene once again built a successful store; and from its profits he bought in the next few years four additional ones at bargain prices, a men's store in Lynn, a dry-goods store in Bath, Maine, and two stores in Boston's Winter Street, one for gloves, the other for laces. He wanted each of his four sons as well as the future husband of his daughter to have a business of his own, but only Edward and Lincoln would prove to be able businessmen.

As a child, Edward was chronically sickly. Once, after staying in bed for a whole year, he had to learn to walk all over again. The weak, crippled boy, unable to keep up with his brothers and their friends was, as he later wrote, constantly urged by his mother: "'Go play,' with a curious intonation on that word 'play.' It came to mean bushes that pulled at your clothes and scratched your hands and face. I got the idea that playing was something you were forced to do, like going to bed early, because adults expected you to. I never hated any part of my work so much as I hated being made to play."

A burden or a joke to his contemporaries, Edward became a friendless loner who identified himself with Hans Christian Andersen's "Ugly Duckling." In Filene's revised version, the agent of his transformation into a swan was to be Harvard College. He kept books hidden in each of his father's stores to study when he had a moment of leisure. When he was carrying cash or merchandise from one store to another on the streetcar or the ferry, he brought along Bancroft's *History* or Darwin's *Origin*.

At twenty, in 1880, the painfully self-educated scholar passed his Harvard entrance examinations. But before college opened, William Filene had a stroke and Edward, as the ablest though not the oldest son, had to take over managing the stores. Fifty-eight years later, in a private file to which no one except Edward had access while he lived, his executors would find a painful keepsake cherished secretly for more than half a century. It was Certificate Number 276, certifying that he had passed his examinations and was eligible to enter Harvard.

Early every morning, Edward now went to Boston to oversee the two shops there. When they closed, earlier than the two in Lynn, he walked to Rowe's Wharf, took the ferry and the cars to Lynn, and worked in those two stores until they closed about midnight. His older brother, Rudolph, had already proven himself irresponsible, and a younger brother, Bert, was demonstrating his incompetence to run the store in Bath. Lincoln, the youngest of all, was only sixteen. Faced with the possibility that his father might never again actively run the stores, Edward determined to run them so well that ten years later, at thirty, he would have accumulated \$100,000; \$50,000 of this would protect his parents, even if the stores were lost; the other \$50,000 would, he hoped, put him through Harvard and launch him on whatever career he might then choose.

When Edward had to go to New York to buy for the stores, he took the midnight train from Boston, got breakfast at the station, worked all day and as late into the night as necessary, then took the next train back to Boston. In this way he avoided both the cost of a hotel room and the company of other buyers who played cards, went to the theater, and partook of the city's many amusements.

Edward was bewildered by the terrifying variety of merchandise offered for sale in New York, and even more by the inexplicable and sudden shifts of fashion that destroyed the value of merchandise in stores. He promptly determined that he would somehow devise scientific methods of merchandising so as to decrease the terrible risks these presented to the retailer. This determination