

# Here's Your Hat! by Jack Lait

THERE are about four first-class restaurants in America with clothes trees "on the floor"—and try to get into one of them! They have waiting lists. The rest have the check system and the cold contempt of their patrons.

It took a mind like that of Captain Kidd to visualize and realize a fortune in discounting the sheepish cowardice of his fellow men. Since he originated it, whoever he was, it has been standardized and is now a regular asset of every cafe and a regular liability of every diner.

Few improvements have been made on the first principles of the method. The most important of the few has been the introduction of pretty girls to act as separators. If there was one thing more needed to make a reluctant boob come across it was the outstretched palm of a fair one.

The restaurants sell the "privilege" by the year, and sometimes for many years in advance. Not a few fashionable eating places have been angled entirely by the checkroom financiers, building upon the known gullibility of citizens at large, banking on the tribute they will pay to redeem hats not yet designed and coats not yet ordered.

The only demand that these cunning crooks make is that diners be told it is against the rules to bring detached apparel into the eating quarters. The system, the girls, the analyzed and proven weaknesses of men will do the rest. Girls are then engaged, also men. There are probably four or five girls per man. The man remains in the background, being the "manager" of each stand. He sees that all the dimes and quarters go into a box, a box with a blot, locked with a combination and lined with burglar-proof walls. His job is not to trust the girls. And those who employ him don't trust him. It's a pretty ethical business, any way you take it.

The girls are not dime-diggers at heart. If they were they'd find means to hold the loose change they get. They are hired. They are instructed. They have to spring the phoney smile, just as chorus girls have to kick their limbs—they put no heart in it, it's all in a day's work.

The busy men, as a rule, pay very slight heed to them. They have long since given up any idea of openly quarreling with the atrocious imposition, and pay their orthodox sum each time, just as they pay two cents for a stamp. The act is defensive rather than either affirmative or yielding to the psychological extortion. Not to tip makes them conspicuous, puts the poor girls in an embarrassing situation, makes them feel like horse thieves. It is cheaper to slip a few measly nickels and have done with the principle of the thing and a weight on the conscience. So thoroughly do they accept the preposterous custom that when a luncher has a guest he shoves forward with two dimes and whispers to the girl, "Two!" Toll, it is, so recognized, and the piker who chafes at it and the iconoclast who rises against it are alike classified as cheap skates who would rather kick up a scandal than kick in a couple of jits.

Now and then an unusually pretty girl catches herself "broke" or sufficiently devoid of conscience and imagination to enter the ranks of the trim trimmers, and then she, like other pretty girls who have to meet strangers, is more or less exposed to flirtations, witless wheezes, odious ogles, raw rejoinders and other quick-work advances.

Being in an indefensible position to begin with, and having to take money (and chicken-feed at that) from all sorts and degrees of strangers of the hostile sex besides, the pretty hat-room girl is in an ultradelicate attitude. She cannot bristle up and grow inflammably indignant, because nobody asked her to be there at all, in the first place; she cannot choke and gulp and pull the "honest working girl" racket, because the skim-swillers she works for won't stand for choking and gulping, she isn't honest, and the only work she does is working the victims. She cannot walk away, because there is no place to walk to. She cannot yell for a cop for many obvious reasons, either.

What, then, can she do? She can endure it as long as she can down her nausea, and then she can beat it. If she stands for it, it will go on in more or less irregular but dependably recurrent manifestations; if she takes the ozone, she is up against starvation or deprivation, on one hand, or a return, with slight variations at best, to another job, on the other. So most of them stick to it until they get married, die, go into the movies, go to the dogs, or fall upon some other misfortune to emancipate them from the life of cat's-paw to the kitty and go-between for the slimy sharks who scale the fish.

Blonde girls are, as a rule, preferred for "type" by the canny pickers. There is a theory (probably fallacious) that blondes are more adaptable, durable and applicable to fast and small touches than the darker of the species, who are credited with more power for galvanic vamping and bigger but fewer extractions. The stock musical show will usually consist of a dozen small, blonde ponies and one large, raven-haired prima donna siren. For popular consumption, I think it incontrovertible, the flapper-style blonde is the surefire commodity. When it comes to badger games, breaking up established homes and such heavy safe-blowing as that, red-haired ones are considered especially enjoyed. But for the common and lower forms of quantity slipovers, light hair and baby face run as the standard-ized product.

Therefore Tessie James had no difficulty getting an assignment to one of the better (braver) Broadway hotels in the Times Square area. She was given a shiny satin uniform with cotton on the under side, neat white collar and cuffs, and an arpoi. of the same without a pocket. Her hose were sheer by request and her spruce young limbs were fetching by nature. The rules of the conspiracy were imparted to her by rote, and she went to it.

Tessie had neither the soul of a doorman thief nor the asbestos armor of a salamander. She hadn't been especially trained or designed for this method of making an underdone livelihood, though she chanced to fit the picture and her financial circumstances chanced to fit the need. She wasn't graced with a protuberant intellect, nor was she anybody's cluck; she wasn't vicious, nor was she prudish. She had been reared on the sidewalks and in the public primary schools and in the subways and in a toothpick-factory and in the world—as much of the world as a girl of her attributes would rub and jostle against in some eighteen years of metropolitan and cosmopolitan adventures.

She had a mother, but no father. Why is it that of all the known female half-orphans 67 per cent have mothers but no fathers? The pitiful little ones usually have fathers, but no mothers. How come, then, that when they grow to the dangerous and romantic age they have mothers, but no fathers? However, it's so. It was certainly so in the case of Tessie, whose mother had taken in sewing for years, until Tessie was old enough to be a certificate out of her teacher that she was sixteen, which was when she was fourteen, at which time she entered commerce.

Tessie's commercial outlook had shown itself, from the first, to be restricted. She had no specialized education, and no special



business gifts. She wasn't even ambitious to discover or develop any. She worked because she knew no other way to get on, and she worked at whatever she could come up with, as she needed jobs. She had engaged in check rooming, with its penny-ante blackmailing, neither because she had any pronounced sympathy with its shabby technique nor against any scruples that shrank from it. It was \$12 a week, and she knew of no place where she could get \$13 a week, decently.

Tessie met many men. Her post was just outside the grill, where only males foregathered—only prosperous males—for it was no place for economizing. Tessie was a "returner." That means that her division of labor was to hand back the hats and coats. The pretty ones are picked for this part of the surgery. The plainer ones may be trusted to take the hats and coats, because no money is passed at that stage, and, therefore, the attractiveness of the operator doesn't count. But the returner is cast in the breach at that all-decisive moment when the victim must not be lost. He must neither balk nor forget. A pretty girl will usually hook enough attention in this emergency to jar the patient into remembering, no matter how preoccupied he

time that she helped him on with his pearl-gray ulster, handed him his rosewood cane and seal lid, and found in her hand a half-dollar. Tessie always had a dime palmed in her right hand for just such miracles, and, of course, she made the switch before the rat-faced tip-detective, spying on her from the recesses of the checkroom, knew that his thieves had been trimmed. Tessie was "on the make" two hours after she had started on the job. In that she was following the lead of almost everybody else on earth who handles cash belonging to someone else. If not, how did a lot of men make fortunes inventing cash registers?

Taven gave her a look more quizzical than penetrating. She smiled in acknowledgment of the extravagant hand-out and moved on to the next customer, but she did turn her head and give him a short slant as he turned the corner to the outer door, and he did do the same for her at the same instant. And Tessie hoped Taven would come again, and Taven knew he would.

He did. He came every day for days. He never pressed himself on Tessie. He grew more familiar with her rapidly because he wanted to—because, in fact, he was campaigning hard to—and because she was disposed to help it along as far as she could without being silly or unwomanly.

They got to exchanging pleasantries—quickly and on the fly, for Tessie could not stop proceedings to talk lengthily to Taven, nor could he make himself a joke and a scandal by obviously prolonging a tete-a-tete.

The tips kept coming. They kept growing, in truth. Taven would empty his change pocket into the girl's hand, and it took finesse and speed to get \$1.40 in miscellaneous coins and turn in fifteen cents and make the silver-sleuth like it. Fifteen cents was the diplomatic sum to hand across, too. The snoopers had noted, with his quick rat-eyes, that Tessie gave the tall, good-looking dude more service than she did the come-and-go grist. But the fifteen cents made it more than all right. Fifteen-cent men were rare. The public dined the girls to death. One day, when Tessie ventured to let Taven bend over rapidly and whisper in her ear, at which she blushed—but nodded—she passed in twenty cents. And the lookout regarded it as splendid business to offer no protest.

The whisper had been an invitation to meet him outside the hotel at three, the hour of her departure from the lunch trick. It had taken two weeks for him to find out that she was as liberty than, which door she took for exit, whether she was sufficiently interested to listen to a "date," whether she was sufficiently "sold" to assent to one.

And that afternoon Tessie met Taven. Her blue eyes sparkled, her perfect young cheeks were pink and alive, her lips were ajar. Tessie had "met" men before. But she confessed to herself that Taven was about the nicest dresser and the grandest looker she had ever more than just seen, and this meeting meant much.

Taven had a car outside. He took her to it without a word beyond a pleasant "Hello" on the sidewalk. He opened the door and she slipped in. Into the park they rode, through the thick traffic, without much being spoken. The park was more free and less hazardous, and Taven lolled at ease and carbureted a few platitudinous pleasantries. Tessie did not jump out of the roadster at these. She banded them with him.

She told him she had to be back in the hotel by five, and he made no demurring answer. And he had her back by five. Taven was no dumbbell—broad daylight in Central Park, with a girl used to strangers and talking a Bronx dialect—was no place to forge, which door she took for exit, whether she was sufficiently interested to listen to a "date," whether she was sufficiently "sold" to assent to one.

He did put his arm around her part of the time, along one of the backstretch sections of the road. She was docile, though not fervent, in this situation. It was to be expected. She would have felt neglected had Taven alled, even on the first ride, to exact some measure of tribute for his gas and oil. Tessie had learned from the world that it spun pretty much on a momentum of so much for so much. She reserved to herself, secretly, a prejudice against too much for any amount, but a little for a bit was O. K.

After Taven let her out of his machine and saw her tripping springily up the hotel steps, he smiled and shook his head and told himself Tessie had made a hit with him. Yes, he would surely play that game along—it had him interested.

That night he thought it over, alone and at length. Everybody has a weak spot, a weakest spot. He had quickly seen Tessie's—she had a poor kid's respect for spenders. He knew, too, that she "held out" all but a few nickels of the tips he had given her, for she had told him the entire inside of the entire system, most of which he had known, anyway. And then he got the big idea.

Tessie was all gooselish next moon, waiting for him. She saw the older and less prepossessing "faker" give Taven the check as a receipt for his hat, coat and stick.

The girl within had Taven's rope ready before Tessie had even turned in the check; for she knew by then, his things. Tessie helped him with the coat. She stood with the hat and case, but instead of taking them, Taven stopped to put on his gloves. That was a good trick, and Tessie warmed to it; here was a man who had invented something.

He finished gloving. He took the hat and put it on. He grasped the crook of the case in his left hand. His right hand slid down into his change pocket. Tessie had her two dimes ready for the magic, for she knew that he would be generous. He slid something into her palm and, without a perceptible motion of the lips, whispered through his teeth:

"Three o'clock—same place."

She felt the something in her palm. It was a bill! Taven had given her more than a dollar in silver several times. But never in all her hat-room experience had she ever been handed a currency bill. It took her off her guard for one second. The nickel-copper in the cage saw her confusion, thought an instant, then moved rapidly toward her from behind. Tessie nodded. Taven went along. Tessie turned and, holding up the two dimes, started for the coin box. The "manager" stopped her.

"Open that hand," he commanded. Tessie, "caught with the goods," had no ready "out." He seized her hand and, without a great deal of resistance from her, opened it. There was the bill.

"I ought to fire you," he said.

"Well, why don't you?" You do, and you don't get the bill.

"If you try walking out of here with that hunk o' money, I'll have you pinched."

"It was given to me."

"Not to keep."

"No!" asked Tessie. "Did you ever hear of a man giving you or anybody like you a buck for getting a hat an' coat?"

"That's none o' your business. It was gave to you as our representative, an' you'll come clean."

"I will not," said Tessie. "And if you try to make me, I'll holler. I'll raise a row right here, an'—"

"All right—keep the dollar—an' take the air."

Tessie reached up for her hat and coat. She put them on and walked out, giving the tyrant a snippy glance. Then she thought to unfold the bill, which was still clutched in a small wad in her hand. She almost keeled over—it was \$100. Tessie had never even seen one before.

"I ought to meet him at three and give this back to him," she told herself. "A few dimes are all right, but this is rough stuff. No, it isn't safe. A man who would give a girl a century—"

"Well, it'll serve him right. I'll stand him up. . . . I need a few weeks' rest, anyway."

may have been, and to shame him or attract him into digging, no matter how wrought up he may have been over the shameless machinery of the graft.

As a returner Tessie came into close contact, thus, with numerous and superior men. She helped them on with their coats, she handed them their hats and sticks. She never sought their eyes, and almost always carried the impersonal and abstract mien of the human automaton. But they wouldn't always let her get away with that. Lots of men want a good deal for ten cents. They stood out for at least a smile, and when Tessie didn't grin at them in return for their own smirks, they tried bromides. Some of them tried to pinch her round arm, and now and then a fresh bird bent down as he held his silver clutched between thumb and finger, knowing she had to concentrate on him until he opened up and dropped it in her palm, to ask her in a boorishly surreptitious or boobishly flagrant way what she had on after awhile, or something equally pointed.

It was not for Tessie to deliver lectures on ethics or disorderly conduct. She wasn't rent with poignant shame over her exposed position, nor did man's Hot-tentot attitude toward women generally wring her finer consciousness. She was there with neat foot-work and could block all

**She Idealized Taven, from the First Time She Helped Him on with His Ulster, Handed Him His Cane and Lid, and Found in Her Hand a Half-Dollar.**

the leads in the common manual without upsetting anything or staging a scene. She had been "officed" before—in the shops, on the streets everywhere. It was like the cold wind of the Winter, outdoors—there it was; she didn't invite it, nor could she very well squawk about it; and, to tell the truth and to carry along the accidental simile, it now and then sent a tingle into the blood.

The tingles came only now and then. Tessie cared little for men as a joblot. But she was susceptible to a few who looked good, who weren't too slightly free and easy with her, and who wore nice clothes. Tessie, though she handled hats and coats professionally, shared the error of most of her sisters, that the "dresser" is rich and elegant. She had not observed that some of the important ones, who were mainly the men who shelled out without even looking down at her, wore wrinkled soft hats and coats more notable for their inconspicuousness and wearing qualities than for their loud linings or smart cut.

Tessie was young and of the people. She judged men by their profiles, their clothes and the amounts of their tips. The tips meant nothing to her, but a man who freely parted with a quarter must be a sport, and a man who had green satin draperies inside his velour Kelly, especially if it had a gold-gazer initial pasted on it, could not be less than a millionaire. By the opposite token, a ten-cent-tip man, who wore a sloopy rainproof throw-on, couldn't amount to much.

That accounted for her idealizing Mark Taven from the first.