

"HOT STUFF" Harlem's Word for Stolen Goods

By CHARLES PIERCE

It doesn't have to be nighttime, if you are a resident of Harlem—any old hour of the day will serve. Any old place is as good as another when the "hot stuff" man comes around to offer you bargains.

This is a racket confined originally to those gentlemen whose fingers were light and who had no scruples as to what happens to those who appropriate the property of others.



Dresses stolen from reliable stores have their identification labels and tags removed before they are brought to Harlem for sale.

But it has grown to such an extent that there are those who have organized it into a regular business. More of that later.

In Harlem, at one time, a person could buy almost anything his heart desired "hot." The story is that one woman furnished her home in most magnificent fashion with furniture of that sort.

Another young lady went into a beauty shop one evening for a marcel and came out with a hat, a pocketbook, a pair of shoes, two pairs of stockings, a pound of butter and a freshly killed chicken! Not only clothing, but food is peddled around by the purveyors of hot stuff.

The entire country was startled to read of the case of the wife of the noted musician who was alleged to have been a customer of one of these men.

Police efforts to break up the hot stuff vendors take different shapes. Sometimes they are tipped off accidentally by the actions of the guilty person. At other times, they are tipped off by jealous competitors. Seldom do they, of their own ingenuity, capture the furtive citizens who deal in stolen goods.

Only recently, a young lady answering her door was confronted with a suspicious looking individual who wanted to sell her some incense. When she told him she didn't want any incense, he then asked if she would like some "hot liquor, right off the boat." He carried an ordinary market basket filled with pints and half pints of whiskey. This would not have been so bad, if he hadn't asked whether or not the lady wanted rye or Scotch!

Another peddler pretended to be selling honey and walked into a well known restaurant downtown and asked if the proprietor wanted to purchase some of his goods. When one of the waitresses thought it would be a nice thing to take home some of it to an ailing husband, she was informed that the vendor had no honey to sell, he was dispensing whiskey.

Fur coats were once the rage with the hot stuff men in town. But with the depression, they were forced to discard this particular line and take up some less expensive goods.

Dresses, stolen from reliable stores, valuable garments, have their identification labels and tags removed before they are brought to Harlem for sale. But once they are sold, there is no rebate or exchange.

Hot stuff salesmen get their customers through recommendation. If a woman finds that one of the men

is a reliable man, she immediately gives the dealer the names of a number of her friends who she is sure will be glad to know of the savings she has effected and the high quality goods she uses. In this manner the hot stuff man builds up a regular clientele, and when he gets in a new stock, he calls on his customers and tells them just what he has in his stores. If he has something especially nice, he goes among his clients and canvasses them to see which will give him the best price.

The prices he receives are ridiculously low—they do not represent, sometimes, one-fifth the value of the goods he is selling. But the buyer has to be on the alert, for the hot stuff man is not always honest with his customers as he should be. Inferior goods are frequently disposed of to regular clients at stiff prices.

Strange to say, few dealers in jewelry are found in Harlem, although there are some who will sell you anything you wish to buy. The money demanded for jewelry is beyond the

pocketbook of the average Harlemite. But those who have the cash do not mind spending it for what they think is a bargain.

So great was the hot stuff racket at one time that vendors almost wore medals or identification badges to keep from selling each other!

Then came the fakers. Sensing the demand of the people for "bargains," clever fellows would go down into the wholesale districts and buy up a lot of cheap stuff and bring it to Harlem, pretending that it was the real goods. They peddled this material all over town until the rank and file got on to the game—then they were stuck.

Of course, the latter was legitimate, but it just about ruined the hot stuff man's game.

The difference was that nine times out of ten, goods the real hot stuff man sold was one hundred per cent superior to that the fake hot stuff man sold!

The faker would see a likely look-

ing customer in the street. Furtively, he would approach and ask whether the man or woman, whichever it happened to be, would be interested in seeing a nice dress or suit. Of course, the offer was interesting and the unsuspecting person would fall into the trap.

Entering an apartment, where it was quiet, the salesman cautioned the customer to say nothing. They would then go into the room where the material was supposed to be located. Here the victim was taken over the leaps. Stacks of goods were all over the room.

Carefully drawing the shades at the windows, the salesman then would turn on the lights and dazzle the eyes of his customer. Of course, a sale was made and the faker made a neat profit on something he bought down on East Broadway or on 116th Street and Park Avenue off the push carts.

But the more modern up-to-date method has that beat to death. White salesmen have taken the place of the

colored man—as in most profitable places—and one is not surprised to see a rough looking fellow at his door, a neatly wrapped box in his hand, offering to show you a nice piece of fur, or a nice bolt of cloth, just off the ship—anything, but it is always "nice." The package is carefully wrapped to give the appearance of coming off of a delivery truck.

The white salesmen operate in pairs—and from a delivery truck in the street. It reaches its highest

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