**The Girl and the Habit**

O. Henry

*Habit—a tendency or aptitude acquired by custom or frequent repetition.*

The critics have assailed every source of inspiration save one. To that one we are driven for our moral theme. When we levied upon the masters of old they gleefully dug up the parallels to our columns. When we strove to set forth real life they reproached us for trying to imitate Henry George, George Washington, Washington Irving, and Irving Bacheller. We wrote of the West and the East, and they accused us of both Jesse and Henry James. We wrote from our heart—and they said something about a disordered liver. We took a text from Matthew or—er—yes, Deuteronomy, but the preachers were hammering away at the inspiration idea before we could get into type. So, driven to the wall, we go for our subject—matter to the reliable, old, moral, unassailable vade mecum—the unabridged dictionary.

Miss Merriam was cashier at Hinkle’s. Hinkle’s is one of the big downtown restaurants. It is in what the papers call the “financial district.” Each day from 12 o’clock to 2 Hinkle’s was full of hungry customers—messenger boys, stenographers, brokers, owners of mining stock, promoters, inventors with patents pending—and also people with money.

The cashiership at Hinkle’s was no sinecure. Hinkle egged and toasted and griddle-caked and coffeed a good many customers; and he lunched (as good a word as “dined”) many more. It might be said that Hinkle’s breakfast crowd was a contingent, but his luncheon patronage amounted to a horde.

Miss Merriam sat on a stool at a desk inclosed on three sides by a strong, high fencing of woven brass wire. Through an arched opening at the bottom you thrust your waiter’s check and the money, while your heart went pit-a-pat.

For Miss Merriam was lovely and capable. She could take 45 cents out of a $2 bill and refuse an offer of marriage before you could—Next!—lost your chance—please don’t shove. She could keep cool and collected while she collected your check, give you the correct change, win your heart, indicate the toothpick stand, and rate you to a quarter of a cent better than Bradstreet could to a thousand in less time than it takes to pepper an egg with one of Hinkle’s casters.

There is an old and dignified allusion to the “fierce light that beats upon a throne.” The light that beats upon the young lady cashier’s cage is also something fierce. The other fellow is responsible for the slang.

Every male patron of Hinkle’s, from the A. D. T. boys up to the curbstone brokers, adored Miss Merriam. When they paid their checks they wooed her with every wile known to Cupid’s art. Between the meshes of the brass railing went smiles, winks, compliments, tender vows, invitations to dinner, sighs, languishing looks and merry banter that was wafted pointedly back by the gifted Miss Merriam.

There is no coign of vantage more effective than the position of young lady cashier. She sits there, easily queen of the court of commerce; she is duchess of dollars and devoirs, countess of compliments and coin, leading lady of love and luncheon. You take from her a smile and a Canadian dime, and you go your way uncomplaining. You count the cheery word or two that she tosses you as misers count their treasures; and you pocket the change for a five uncomputed. Perhaps the brass-bound inaccessibility multiplies her charms—anyhow, she is a shirt-waisted angel, immaculate, trim, manicured, seductive, bright-eyed, ready, alert—Psyche, Circe, and Ate in one, separating you from your circulating medium after your sirloin medium.

The young men who broke bread at Hinkle’s never settled with the cashier without an exchange of badinage and open compliment. Many of them went to greater lengths and dropped promissory hints of theatre tickets and chocolates. The older men spoke plainly of orange blossoms, generally withering the tentative petals by after-allusions to Harlem flats. One broker, who had been squeezed by copper proposed to Miss Merriam more regularly than he ate.

During a brisk luncheon hour Miss Merriam’s conversation, while she took money for checks, would run something like this:

“Good morning, Mr. Haskins—sir?—it’s natural, thank you—don’t be quite so fresh... Hello, Johnny—ten, fifteen, twenty—chase along now or they’ll take the letters off your cap... Beg pardon—count it again, please—Oh, don’t mention it... Vaudeville?—thanks; not on your moving picture—I was to see Carter in Hedda Gabler on Wednesday night with Mr. Simmons... ‘Scuse me, I thought that was a quarter... Twenty-five and seventy-five’s a dollar—got that ham-and-cabbage habit yet. I see, Billy... Who are you addressing?—say—you’ll get all that’s coming to you in a minute... Oh, fudge! Mr. Bassett—you’re always fooling—no—? Well, maybe I’ll marry you some day—three, four and sixty-five is five... Kindly keep them remarks to yourself, if you please... Ten cents?—’scuse me; the check calls for seventy—well, maybe it is a one instead of a seven... Oh, do you like it that way, Mr. Saunders?—some prefer a pomp; but they say this Cleo de Merody does suit refined features... and ten is fifty... Hike along there, buddy; don’t take this for a Coney Island ticket booth... Huh?—why, Macy’s—don’t it fit nice? Oh, no, it isn’t too cool—these light-weight fabrics is all the go this season... Come again, please—that’s the third time you’ve tried to—what?—forget it—that lead quarter is an old friend of mine... Sixty-five?—must have had your salary raised, Mr. Wilson... I seen you on Sixth Avenue Tuesday afternoon, Mr. De Forest—swell?—oh, my!—who is she?... What’s the matter with it?—why, it ain’t money—what?—Columbian half?—well, this ain’t South America... Yes, I like the mixed best—Friday?—awfully sorry, but I take my jiu-jitsu lesson on Friday—Thursday, then... Thanks—that’s sixteen times I’ve been told that this morning—I guess I must be beautiful... Cut that out, please—who do you think I am?... Why, Mr. Westbrook—do you really think so?—the idea!—one-eighty and twenty’s a dollar—thank you ever so much, but I don’t ever go automobile riding with gentlemen—your aunt?—well, that’s different—perhaps... Please don’t get fresh—your check was fifteen cents, I believe—kindly step aside and let... Hello, Ben—coming around Thursday evening?—there’s a gentleman going to send around a box of chocolates, and... forty and sixty is a dollar, and one is two...”

About the middle of one afternoon the dizzy goddess Vertigo—whose other name is Fortune—suddenly smote an old, wealthy and eccentric banker while he was walking past Hinkle’s, on his way to a street car. A wealthy and eccentric banker who rides in street cars is—move up, please; there are others.

A Samaritan, a Pharisee, a man and a policeman who were first on the spot lifted Banker McRamsey and carried him into Hinkle’s restaurant. When the aged but indestructible banker opened his eyes he saw a beautiful vision bending over him with a pitiful, tender smile, bathing his forehead with beef tea and chafing his hands with something frappé out of a chafing-dish. Mr. McRamsey sighed, lost a vest button, gazed with deep gratitude upon his fair preserveress, and then recovered consciousness.

To the Seaside Library all who are anticipating a romance! Banker McRamsey had an aged and respected wife, and his sentiments toward Miss Merriam were fatherly. He talked to her for half an hour with interest—not the kind that went with his talks during business hours. The next day he brought Mrs. McRamsey down to see her. The old couple were childless—they had only a married daughter living in Brooklyn.

To make a short story shorter, the beautiful cashier won the hearts of the good old couple. They came to Hinkle’s again and again; they invited her to their old-fashioned but splendid home in one of the East Seventies. Miss Merriam’s winning loveliness, her sweet frankness and impulsive heart took them by storm. They said a hundred times that Miss Merriam reminded them so much of their lost daughter. The Brooklyn matron, née Ramsey, had the figure of Buddha and a face like the ideal of an art photographer. Miss Merriam was a combination of curves, smiles, rose leaves, pearls, satin and hair-tonic posters. Enough of the fatuity of parents.

A month after the worthy couple became acquainted with Miss Merriam, she stood before Hinkle one afternoon and resigned her cashiership.

“They’re going to adopt me,” she told the bereft restaurateur. “They’re funny old people, but regular dears. And the swell home they have got! Say, Hinkle, there isn’t any use of talking—I’m on the à la carte to wear brown duds and goggles in a whiz wagon, or marry a duke at least. Still, I somehow hate to break out of the old cage. I’ve been cashiering so long I feel funny doing anything else. I’ll miss joshing the fellows awfully when they line up to pay for the buckwheats and. But I can’t let this chance slide. And they’re awfully good, Hinkle; I know I’ll have a swell time. You owe me nine-sixty-two and a half for the week. Cut out the half if it hurts you, Hinkle.”

And they did. Miss Merriam became Miss Rosa McRamsey. And she graced the transition. Beauty is only skin-deep, but the nerves lie very near to the skin. Nerve—but just here will you oblige by perusing again the quotation with which this story begins?

The McRamseys poured out money like domestic champagne to polish their adopted one. Milliners, dancing masters and private tutors got it. Miss—er—McRamsey was grateful, loving, and tried to forget Hinkle’s. To give ample credit to the adaptability of the American girl, Hinkle’s did fade from her memory and speech most of the time.

Not every one will remember when the Earl of Hitesbury came to East Seventy- Street, America. He was only a fair-to-medium earl, without debts, and he created little excitement. But you will surely remember the evening when the Daughters of Benevolence held their bazaar in the W-f-A-a Hotel. For you were there, and you wrote a note to Fannie on the hotel paper, and mailed it, just to show her that—you did not? Very well; that was the evening the baby was sick, of course.

At the bazaar the McRamseys were prominent. Miss Mer—er—McRamsey was exquisitely beautiful. The Earl of Hitesbury had been very attentive to her since he dropped in to have a look at America. At the charity bazaar the affair was supposed to be going to be pulled off to a finish. An earl is as good as a duke. Better. His standing may be lower, but his outstanding accounts are also lower.

Our ex-young-lady-cashier was assigned to a booth. She was expected to sell worthless articles to nobs and snobs at exorbitant prices. The proceeds of the bazaar were to be used for giving the poor children of the slums a Christmas din- Say! did you ever wonder where they get the other 364?

Miss McRamsey—beautiful, palpitating, excited, charming, radiant—fluttered about in her booth. An imitation brass network, with a little arched opening, fenced her in.

Along came the Earl, assured, delicate, accurate, admiring—admiring greatly, and faced the open wicket.

“You look chawming, you know—‘pon my word you do—my deah,” he said, beguilingly.

Miss McRamsey whirled around.

“Cut that joshing out,” she said, coolly and briskly. “Who do you think you are talking to? Your check, please. Oh, Lordy!—”

Patrons of the bazaar became aware of a commotion and pressed around a certain booth. The Earl of Hitesbury stood near by pulling a pale blond and puzzled whisker.

“Miss McRamsey has fainted,” some one explained.