

Our Daily Bribe

The Degrading Practice of Tipping

by ALVIN F. HARLOW

AMAZING, what a lot of common sense a good, thumping depression hammers into us — temporarily! Five years ago we heard that the practice of tipping was done for. Waiters and taxi drivers began to bow and give thanks over unexpected dimes.

But common sense vanished like smoke as soon as times began to mend. In the first several months of 1937 tipping came into its own again, and apparently our “recession” of present date has not yet had much effect on it. It cannot have had, when one hears of little department-store salesgirls giving away an eighth of a week’s salary in one beauty-shop tip.

We are accustomed to shouting from the hustings and the housetops about trends in our life which are called un-American. What, may I ask, is more un-American than tipping? It doesn’t belong in American society; it doesn’t belong in a democracy. It is a product of lands where for centuries there has been a servile class.

One hundred years and more ago there was practically no tipping of white persons in the United States. In the course of historical research I have pored through hundreds of the books which every European visitor to America used to write as soon as he returned home. Many of them express amazement at having found in America that they were not expected to tip and that in fact some persons whom they regarded as servants were offended at the mere suggestion.

Wrote one:

The coachman does not expect the slightest fee or remuneration. There is no eternal opening of the door and “Please, sir, I stop here,” — “Please, sir, I don’t go any further,” — “Please, sir, remember the coachman.”

The truth of the matter is that we had no “servants” then; the waiter and the hostler

and the coachman regarded themselves rather as employees, free citizens whose means of livelihood were as honorable as anyone else’s. The cook and the farmhand were apt to be found eating at table with the family — as they do yet in some rural districts.

One English traveler named John Fowler told of stopping in 1830 at a little town in upstate New York. The charge for supper, lodging, and breakfast astounded him:

Total, 81 cents; waiter 0; chambermaid and boots ditto; and civility and thanks into the bargain. Will this be credited in England? It will be some time before it is *practised* there, at all events.

Alack, the position is now reversed, and America is the land of bigger and better tipping. The European menial begins to chuckle as soon as he sees a well-dressed American coming. We are even tipping for reasons Europe hasn’t thought of yet.

As late as 1900, the waiter, the bellboy, and the Pullman porter were almost the only people in America who regularly accepted tips (and, if you did not tip them, there was seldom any hint that they despised you for it). But our newly rich promoted the practice of tipping everybody by using tips to buy special service which others could not afford. Also they went to Europe and, finding that you had to tip your way around over there, they came back and threw money about to prove that they had been abroad and knew the rules. Naïve folk with less money imitated them. The craze for keeping up with the Joneses and for aping the ways of Europe has lost little popularity since then.

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

WITH THE beginning of the present century we entered the age of rackets; and today tipping is one of the creamiest rackets

known to man. You are liable to open and flagrant insult not only if you do not tip at all but also if you merely don't tip as lavishly as the proud modern menial thinks you should. If you come again within range of such an offended one, you'll get almost no service at all, or there'll be a grease spot on your coat or something else to remind you that it is the servant who runs the show — not the man who has paid a scheduled price but who doesn't get value for his money unless he pays blackmail as well.

When the first signs of habitual tipping began to appear in the South 30 years ago, several States made gestures at curbing it by law, as did also Washington and Iowa. The West and South are the last frontiers of pioneer Americanism. I recall the days, not so long ago but before the South acquired good roads, when it might be close to an insult to offer money to a farmer or villager who had toiled manfully to help me get my car out of a mudhole. On walking trips, I have been rowed across rivers by Southern mountaineers who thus had to cross the stream twice and who were astonished, even slightly offended, when I offered to pay a regular ferryman's fee for what they regarded as a neighborly gesture. With good roads, those days are largely past, and now "nothing for nothing" is more generally the rule. But there are still areas in the South and West where few functionaries expect a tip and others are apt to refuse one when offered.

RACKETEERING IN DISGUISE

OF COURSE the city and the Eastern city in particular is where tipping flourishes at its worst. Restaurants, clubs, apartment houses, department stores, beauty parlors, filling stations, telephone call stations, bootblack stands, taxis, all harbor employees who expect that extra coin which used to be given, *pour boire*, to the servant because he was a serf or little better than one. The dweller in an apartment house or residential hotel goes to and fro daily past a row of expectant palms — doorman, hallman, elevator operators, superintendent (glorified janitor) and helpers, maids. He must give Christmas presents too, preferably cash, to all, else service is apt to be subject to various delays and little accidents and



performed with veiled insolence. In a good restaurant you are expected to tip the headwaiter, the captain, the waiter, the hat-check girl, and the cigarette girl — if you are sap enough to buy cigarettes from her at more than the regular price. The more beautiful she thinks she is, the bigger the tip she will expect.

The hat-check service and the public telephone call station are illustrations of the vicious circle in which tipping has moved. Both were originally installed as courtesies, conveniences for patrons which would bring additional good will to the restaurant and the telephone company. But urbanites with more money than brains began handing coins to the individual in charge, usually a pretty girl, and the damage was done. Today the telephone company expects patrons to pay most of the girl operator's wage, while the hat-check concession has become so valuable that \$5,000 and more yearly have been paid for it in a New York night club, and the girl who tends it is now paid a salary and forbidden to keep a penny of the money she takes in. Yet dumb, impressionable males still hand her tips, some because they are afraid not to, others with a leer and what they conceive to be a sort of caressing badinage, pretending to themselves that they are conferring a bounty on her.

Your excuse for tipping is: "These people get such small salaries I know they need the money."

Well, who is to blame for the small salaries? Primarily, you are. You have developed the tipping system to a point where employers rely on it. Pretending to supply you with food or service at a stated price, they know you will give the employees who serve you the rough equivalent of what the employers are saving in wages. You fool yourself into believing that you lodge or eat for a certain figure when the real cost is much higher. By the time you have tipped everybody at a hotel, your expenses may easily run from 50 cents to \$1.50 per day more than the quoted price for a room, depending on how lavishly you tip.

Tipping has been raised to its present absurd importance largely by the show-off mentality and the deadly fear of 99 out of 100 Americans of being thought pikers by their fellows. It also gives the donor the opportunity to feel lordly and superior to the person tipped — a laughable bit of self-deception, for the so-

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called servant does not regard himself as an inferior nor the tip as a kindness on your part. It was once a gratuity thankfully received or a reward for special service. Now it has come to be regarded as payment due, no matter whether extra service or even decent service is given or not.

This explains why some hotels pay their bellboys no salary at all. One big establishment in New York was recently found to be paying its bellboys 4 cents a day. A survey of 28,000 restaurants in New York a few years ago brought confessions from many proprietors that they couldn't stay in business if the public did not for the most part support their waiters. Many others were equally frank in admitting that their prices for food took into consideration the fact that the public paid most of the cost of service.

Even when you are a friend's house guest in the country you must tip all or nearly all the servants on leaving. There is nothing that the host and hostess can do about this. Many people are completely at a loss to know how much to tip under such circumstances. Therefore social pundits write articles gravely telling us just how much to part with to each lackey, and the pernicious habit becomes a little more deeply engrained.

Who doesn't remember the old advertising gibe at the man who couldn't read the French menu: *What is the waiter thinking?* In heaven's name, why should any intelligent person care what a waiter is thinking? Why, because 99 per cent of us are swanking, trying to make ourselves out richer and more important and more sophisticated than we really are, and we are dreadfully self-conscious in the presence of a flunky who, we fear, can see through us.

Did you ever dine at a fashionable restaurant with a wealthy person who is inordinately proud of his friendship with a favorite waiter and with the headwaiter? Perhaps he shakes hands with each and exchanges inquiries about the health of the wife and children. This proves to the gaping onlookers that he is just as much at home at this luxurious resort as in his own living room and undoubtedly throws money around as if it were ditchwater. But it is the testimony of the people who work for tips themselves that, the longer the rich have had their money, the less they are apt to tip. They are accustomed to having servants about them

who work for wages, not for tips, and they care not a snap of the finger what the waiter or taxi driver is thinking. It is the near-rich, the parvenu, the would-be, and the show-off who worry about the impression they are making.

POLITE BLACKMAIL

ONE OF THE worst features of the tipping madness is that it is taking a firm hold on the habits of low-income folk in the cities and cutting into earnings where expenses are already too high for comfort. In New York, where senseless tipping reaches its peak, you will see clerks and salesgirls eating twenty-cent lunches at a soda fountain and tipping the soda jerker five or ten cents. Patrons of an "automat," who receive no service from anybody, either from force of habit or from a feeling that they've just got to tip somebody often leave a nickel or a dime on the table, to be picked up either by the bus boy or, as not infrequently happens, by some other diner! It's a wonder they don't tip the mechanical contrivances from which they take their food.

Vying with this practice for asininity are the tips given to the barber, the bootblack, and the taxi driver. Even the proprietor of the small barbershop, who works one of the chairs, accepts his tip with no apparent embarrassment. As for the taxi driver, he does nothing for you save what is in his implied contract — he carries you from where you hail him to where you want to go. Furthermore, he will sometimes cheat you a little, if he can, by going around an extra block or so, to run up the fare on the meter; and yet New York long ago, for no earthly reason, inaugurated the practice of giving him a tip. Al Jolson used to get a laugh by remarking casually in the course of a story that he had taken a taxi from Manhattan out to his home on Long Island — "The fare was twenty-nine ninety, and with the tip that made just thirty dollars" — a gibe at the stingy tipper at which audiences roared delightedly.

A survey made by the Motor Transit Committee of New York 7 years ago resulted in an estimate that New York City had paid its taxi drivers \$26,000,000 in tips in 1930. This was one and a half times the total passenger revenue of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad for that year, twice that of the Erie, and 5 times



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that of the Reading or the Lackawanna. The taxi tip has now a firm hold on other Eastern cities and is speeding westward. Even in Washington, long one of the most American of our cities, you may now have a sneer tossed after you if you fail to tip a taxi driver.

Metropolitan salesgirls themselves are among the stupidest tippers when they go shopping. I know one woman earning from \$25 to \$30 a week in a big New York department store who, in two hours of shopping, handed out \$3 in tips — \$1 to the woman who fitted a corset on her, 50 cents to another who fitted her with gloves, and so on. Here note the difference between "aristocracy" and the rest of us: The saleswomen in the finer Fifth Avenue coat and gown shops are not offered as many tips as are those in the more plebeian department stores! And the people who do the tipping in the former are apt to be movie actresses.

The notion of tipping a store salesman or saleswoman will strike most of America dumb with amazement; yet it is common metropolitan practice. Regular customers thus get the employee under obligation to them or greedy for more and bigger tips; and, when a special sale is scheduled, the tippee may sequester articles which he believes his generous tippers would like to have first chance to buy. This is the borderland of commercial bribery — where, after all, a considerable percentage of our tipping belongs.

Just before Christmas in New York you may see housewives handing the managers of chain grocery stores Christmas gifts of \$1 or upward; and the managers are not too proud, not too dignified to accept them, either. Think you that the women who tip most at Yuletide are not waited on first, do not have their purchases delivered ahead of the rest? And do they not get the choicest fruits and vegetables? Yes, dear reader, they do.

I overheard a salesgirl saying that she couldn't afford a permanent at the moment; besides the \$5 charge, there'd be a \$1.50 tip.

"Why tip so much?" asked an older friend. "I certainly wouldn't."

"Oh, everybody does it," was the reply. "That is, almost everybody except a few sorta cheap guys that get by on a dollar. If you give any less than that, they'd probably throw it back in your face. Lots of people tip two bucks."

These girls, when they get a 35-cent hair rinse, tip 15 cents — more than 40 per cent. And the operators who accept these nice tips, official investigations have shown, are very often beginners, novices who draw no salary but have been assured by the shop proprietors that the tips alone will give them a good income.

Why should redcaps at railroad stations be dependent for a living entirely on the generosity of the traveler, and why should the traveler be annoyed and influenced by his fear of seeming cheap? There should be a fixed price for the carriage of each and every piece of baggage.

In New York the theoretical price of a shoe-shine is a nickel; but if you do not give the bootblack a dime he is outraged and will probably tell you so.

In Hollywood some of the world's wildest tipping goes on, not only in public places but in the studios. When they finish making a picture, the stars and headliners tip everybody who has taken part in the production, handing out \$10 here, \$50 there, and so on up to \$500 or more. Movie actors draw large salaries and must have the public reputation of being good fellows and good spenders. Here again the tip has become a vested right. Cameramen, technicians, and others have long memories, and there are ways of getting back at the actor who doesn't come across. A certain star gave her dresser a car and supplied a chauffeur to teach her how to drive it! Beauty-shop operators who catch the fancy of a woman star may be given an automobile or a house and lot or set up in a business of their own.

WHY CLING TO DEGRADATION?

THESE RIGHTER times have brought some rumblings of discontent with the system. Last October, Solon C. Ball, President of the National Council of Dining Car Employees, asserted that train passengers were "sick and tired of tipping" and had "virtually abolished the tipping practice" — a considerable overstatement. Hence his organization was asking a minimum salary of \$150 a month and the prohibition of tipping. Laudable as the idea was, it was too revolutionary to put over all of a sudden. A few hotels and restaurants are trying to curb tipping by adding 10 per cent to the bill for "service" — an amusing way of

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saving the American face. In a large uptown meat market in New York City, this sign recently appeared on the wall:

PLEASE DO NOT TIP THE BUTCHERS. YOU ARE
ENTITLED TO COURTEOUS AND CAREFUL SERVICE.

However, it is hard to stop the average American's tipping by any sort of rule.

Italy and Germany have halted tipping by this ten-per-cent rule — and no “maybes”! France pretends to frown on tipping, but no rule is enforced, and there is much bad service and insolence in Paris now. In some other countries of Europe you still must bribe the man at a railroad ticket window, else you are told that there are no sleeper berths, perhaps not even first-class seats, left. Are we headed for this sort of thing in America? Even now,

people who have the cash and will grease the right palms can often obtain theater, football, or prize-fight tickets in preferred locations or can buy them when others are told that no seats are left.

What sane, intelligent American is there who wouldn't rather pay a fixed and slightly higher price for food or service and be rid of the bother and mutual degradation of tipping? If the practice should, by a miracle, cease tomorrow, employees, unions, and labor boards would quickly force employers to raise wages — those who hadn't already done it themselves. Service, I think, would be better, employees would no longer be “servants,” and employee and patron would be able to meet and part on a basis of mutual and businesslike respect.

Song

*Let him eat,
who would live merry,
of the red
and lonely berry.*

*Let him drink,
who would be wise,
the slanting crystal
of the skies.*

*Who would have
a heart made sound,
let him sleep
against the ground.*

*With rain for thirst
and thorn for bread
and a rock
beneath his head,*

*he will thrive
within his grove,
he will feast
on lack of love.*

Frances Frost