

## The Spiffed Overcoat

A Story in Ready-Made-Clothing, by Wilbur D. Nesbit

**D**ON'T you want the spiff on that sale, Number Eighty-six?"

Miss Renlow, the bookkeeper, was a brunette, very calm and very dignified—but she had a very pleasant smile when she chose to smile. And it was her pleasure so to do when she asked this of Thomas Ogden, who had signified the first hour of his experience as a retail clothing salesman by selling the first suit he laid his hands on to the first customer that fell to his lot.

"I don't know," Ogden replied, trying hard to look as if he understood what "spiff" meant, and wondering if it were trimming or some sort of a pocket flap. I don't know. I forgot to ask the customer."

Then Miss Renlow's smile grew into a laugh. When she laughed you could see that it was real sunshine in her eyes, and that the roses flashed in and out of her cheeks in a distracting way. It is pleasant to amuse such women.

"You didn't ask the customer?" she bubbled. "Well, I should hope not.

Look here, Mr. Eighty-six, you had better ask some of the men in the store about spiff. I the meantime, I'll fix your sales check for you. Look."

She took a pencil and below the entry on the check she drew a triangle.

"Now, when you get your pay this week, if that customer doesn't return the suit and get his money, you'll get half a dollar beside your salary."

Ogden leaned over and looked at the triangle, then looked at her stupidly.

"Half a dollar extra, you mean?"

"Certainly."

"I wish you would make those geometrical designs on all sales checks I fill out."

"But I can't. It's your place to do that—when you deserve it. That's spiff. It's just like the other men not to have told you."

Ogden had had beginner's luck. Manager Ferguson had employed him solely on the strength of his good appearance. When he reported for duty at the store he had been registered by the timekeeper, who told him his

number would be Eighty-six, and that he would be expected to register his goings and coming by means of a key which printed his number and the hour and minute on a strip of paper in the time clock. From the timekeeper he had been conducted to the bookkeeper's desk to get his book of sales slips, and he had lingered a moment to chat with Miss Renlow. To her he had once expressed a polite surprise that she could take care of the books for such a large store.

"Goodness!" she had replied. "I don't. I simply keep the books for the employees—salaries, sales and records like that. There are five other girls who keep the stock and account books."

Ogden had been about to say something else, when a penetrating call of "Eighty-six!" came to them. He framed a word or two, but the girl interrupted him with:

"Isn't that your number—Eighty-six?"

"Why, yes."

"Eighty-six!" once more floated to them.

"Well," the girl explained, "that means that the floor has a customer for you."

Ogden surprised her by excusing himself before going toward the front. And she watched him as he approached the customer, wondering within herself at his coolness. Ogden walked up to his man, trying to approach him as suavely and confidently as clerks had always greeted him. The customer nodded and said:

"I want a good double-breasted suit for office wear. Something I can put on every day and look good in. A twenty-dollar suit."

Ogden slipped his new tape measure about the man's chest and got his coat size. The customer laid his hand on a pile of clothing on the table beside them.

"This is the kind of a pattern I want," he said.

Ogden took the top coat from the stack. It was the size wanted. The vest and trousers were within reach. Within ten minutes the man handed over the twenty dollars and ordered the suit sent to his home. Then Ogden had returned to the bookkeeper's desk to be asked if he wanted the spiff. Evidently this was something worth looking up. He would seek information. As he turned to go down the aisle, Mr. Ferguson, the manager, came along.

"Well," Ferguson asked, "how are things coming?"

"Very well. Just sold my first suit." "And it was spiffed, too, Mr. Ferguson," added Miss Renlow.

"Good for you, Mr. Ogden. That's a first rate start. Just bear in mind that we're here to sell goods and that the folks who come in have got to do the buying. That's the main point. By the way, I told Sanders to show you about taking care of your stock."

Sanders was the oldest salesman in the store. And furthermore he was the best salesman in the city. For that reason he never had been given the position of manager. Some men are so good at their work that it does not pay their employers to advance them. Sanders explained to Ogden how the salesmen were numbered, and how each man got a customer in turn. Then he led the way between the tables to the very rear of the store and pointed out two long tables covered with neat piles of coats, vests and trousers.

"This all seems to be odd stuff," Ogden observed, idly lifting one or two coat collars.

"Don't worry. Nearly all of it is spiffed."

"Spiffed?" Ogden asked, innocently.

"Sure. Got p.m.'s on 'em."

"P.m.'s?"

"Yes. Don't you understand what a spiff is?"

"I've heard of it—but what is it, Mr. Sanders?"

"Well, when we've carried goods over one season—this stuff has stayed with us, some of it, or five or six years—we spiff it so that the men will push it out. It's like this." Sanders showed Ogden the price mark sewed in the neck of the coat. Below the cost mark and selling price were drawn certain odd hieroglyphics in red ink.

"You see," he said, "this suit is marked ten dollars. Here's a triangle in red ink on the label. That means if you sell the suit to your customer the bookkeeper will credit you with fifty cents. Here is a square in red ink on this one. This suit is twelve dollars. It isn't quite as old as the other—only two seasons behind the styles. If you sell it your p.m. is a quarter."

"But I should think the customer would know at once that it was not the fashion."

"You're supposed to be able to know whether your customer knows that or not. Anyway, the suit's been marked down from eighteen dollars, and that's an argument. Now that little stack of coats at the end of the table—only about six altogether—is ringed. There's a red ink ring on each price mark. There's a daddy dollar in the till waiting for you if you push one of them out."

"Why, if a man sells four or five suits a day, and all of them 'spiffed' as you express it, he'll make a snug little sum."

"Yes—If he sells 'em."

With which enigmatic reply Sanders proceeded to illustrate how collars must be turned up when the coats were put in the stack, and that the piles must be neatly made.

"Number Twelve!" interrupted them.

"That's my call," Sanders said, hurriedly starting toward the front of the store, where he met a couple, a man and his wife from the outlying districts.

"Something in a suit?" Sanders asked suavely.

"Well, I dunno," the man replied.

"We just want to look around," the woman volunteered.

"Certainly. You want sort of an everyday suit, or something more for Sunday wear?"

"Something he can wear to church or for dress up," the woman said.

The man nodded agreement. Sanders turned to lead them toward his stock bestowing a wink upon Ogden as he passed. Ogden stood watching Sanders take them quickly and quietly into the midst of the clothing tables. He wondered at the ease and sureness with which it was done, in spite of the woman's continuous declaration that they really were not going to buy, that all they wanted was to look about.

"Charley's got a schnuckle," murmured a voice in his ear. Turning he saw another salesman.

"A schnuckle?" Ogden asked.

"Yes. He'll spiff that fellow, sure as guns. Charley has more luck than anybody else. I've had four customers today—sold one. The other three were 'just looking.' I turned them over, but they went out without buying."

Ogden went back to the bookkeeper again. He had decided that she was to be his guide, philosopher and friend. From her he learned that "turning over" a customer meant, in the slang of the store, to pass him along to another salesman when he proved to be too difficult to please. Miss Renlow told him he was very lucky not to have turned over his first customer, and that he should be proud, for many a salesman "fell down" on his first attempt, and gave up in despair. "Wait until you get a man who brings his v along," she cautioned. "I've been around a clothing store long enough to resolve that if I ever get married I'll not go with my husband to buy his clothes. If women knew what the salesmen think of them they'd make their husband's clothing themselves."

"Maybe the men—"

"Thirty-five is signalling to you," the girl told him.

Ogden turned and saw Salesman Thirty-five tugging at some coats on a table, and looking eagerly in his direction. Back of Thirty-five stood a man with undecided eyes, and in the aisle was a woman who gripped an umbrella and some bundles as though she were about to run for a train. Ogden went toward them. Thirty-five looked up with relief.

"Oh, Mr. Ogden," he said, "I wish you would see if you can't find something that will suit this gentleman. This is Mr. Ogden's own stock here,

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