

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Secrets of the Trade

I suppose hoisting is just a matter of technique, like everything else. How do you do it? It's like asking how long is a piece of string. There are different techniques for different shops: Harrods, Fortnum and Mason, Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel in Paris, I steal things differently in different shops. No, I'd never bother with Marks and Spencer's and I'd never take food. Why should I bother with half-a-crown stuff when a £5,000 designer dress, resold, will earn me enough money to eat out all week.

I use a foil bag sometimes, though I work the old way still too – down my knickers, you know how I mean. But when you use a bag, it's different. You get a really smart carrier bag from somewhere posh and then you layer the inside of the bag a few times with foil. The point is that when you take the clothes out of the department stores or even these little exclusive shops, you have got to get past the bells: you've got to cover the little round pin at the back of the alarm as well as the buzzer itself with the foil. Its all got to be covered up, and if there is any gap in the foil that you often get takeaway meals in. Anyone can line a carrier bag, or even have a leather handbag lined like mine, but it's got to be thick foil, because the other kitchen foil splits if you push the hangers in the bag too quick. The tiniest hole can set off the whole alarm system and that's enough to get you nicked.

The buzzers that annoy me the most are the ones with ink in them. They are disgusting – who invented them I don't know! Some people do get covered in ink and ruin the clothes even after they have got them out of the shops, but I found a way around that. A friend of mine who worked in a store helped me out by giving me a tool. I've not had it very long – just a few years – but it has saved me wasting a fortune.

Once I knew someone who had some beautiful pure silk men's suits. Armani, I think they were, but they had those horrible ink buzzers on them. They were £500 suits and they only wanted £20 each for them, because no one could get the buzzers off. One by one different people, who said they could unlock them, tried and ruined the suits. I mean no one minds messing one up but if you mess three or four suits up it's just a waste. A real crime.

And I do hate wasting things just for the sake of it. They say you live and learn and certainly with shoplifting you find out as you go along how to do it so that you don't waste anything, but I've taught myself what to do, and what works and what doesn't. The simplest way to get most of the alarms off is just to burn them through a little bit from the back. Heat melts the plastic at the back of the alarms and then the plastic comes and the alarms fall apart in your hands.

Twenty years ago we worked with a box. Yes, it was Christmas-time, my kids were small so it must have been over twenty years ago. Someone we knew made a box with lead flashing but that was too heavy to carry. Then they made a box with foil and a spring clip, so as you opened it up, it snapped back again. The box was really beautiful. It was a square box with a flip lid, but because it was wrapped up with some really good wrapping paper from Selfridges, it looked like a big present. I loved that box. You could get three mink coats in it easy, no problem with the hangers if you know how to roll them properly. I used to love working with that box, but in the end someone must have recognized me, and I got tumbled and so had to give it up.

What actually happened was, one afternoon I was out working the shops, and two coppers came in and turned my Chrissie over. I had a big belly that day, not only because I was pregnant with my youngest daughter but because I had been working the shops with my big knickers. You know, putting the stuff down me – the buzzers weren't such a problem then. Well, I've arrived at my place in Haggerston and my face dropped as soon as I see these coppers. The car outside was loaded up with gear as I'd worked really hard getting the most beautiful cashmere stuff from Harrods. I had presents for everyone.

As soon as I spotted the coppers I pretended to Chrissie that I needed money to pay the cab. I gave Chris the eye and he knew I was loaded up. He gave me a couple of quid and my driver took the hint and said, 'Well, that will be £2,' and I paid him, and he drove to take the stuff back round to the woman I'd been working with, who we had just dropped off.

The first copper said to me, 'How are you Shirley?' and as I could see he knew me, I didn't act at all but just said, 'Oh I'll be glad when I drop this

one,' but of course he thought I meant the baby not the cashmere coat I had down my knickers.

He said, 'I'm sorry to hear about your brother Adgie' (who had died a few years earlier). He made small talk that my Adgie was very well liked, despite the fact that he was a thief all his life and robbed banks. (I'm not surprised the police liked my Adgie, he always paid them off and never screamed afterwards, because he knew how to play the game.) Finally, the small talk died out and this other copper came out with what they wanted: he asks me if I know anything about a box. So I just acted like I didn't know what he was talking about. Anyway, they asked, would I mind if they looked round. They didn't have a warrant, but I said, 'No, help yourself,' because I knew I'd got everything out.

It wasn't long before the 'nice' copper found the empty box in the back of the cupboard. He went to the other one as he came down from upstairs, 'What do you think about this?' Before he could answer I said the kids had found it outside and brought it in. The first copper said to me, 'Where did you find it, in the street then?' and I went 'No, my little boy Harry brought it in.' He went, 'Oh!' and threw the box back in the cupboard. He knew there was nothing they could do, because they didn't find any gear with tickets on in my house, but I knew it was time to get rid of the box and I made Chrissie tear it up and dump it.

After that, when I went shopping, I didn't take the stuff back to Haggerston any more, because I thought I might be watched. I had enough criminal convictions to be known to the police as a professional shoplifter. So I started dressing up in wigs and different outfits when I went out to work, to avoid being recognized. The kids used to laugh at my wigs. But when I went out, even they didn't recognize me in my get-ups. I was good at making myself look different, I suppose I still am, I enjoy it. It's like making sure you know how to wear the uniform for the job. It was changing my appearance all the time that really got me out of a bad nick, once, when we were in Scotland.

Today I still use disguises and work down my knickers, although I do have some good leather bags lined with foil and use them when I need to. I always change my appearance and I have had so many different names that even I don't remember all of them. I've been stealing ever since I was a child

and I'd be trying to do all that in between bringing up my kids with all their problems, so I really have forgot half of what I got up to. I do remember how much the shops have changed from when I went out shoplifting with the Forty Thieves. Even in the 1960s, when I lived in Hoxton with the kids, and the shops first went self-service, everything seemed much smaller and easier than they are now.

Most days when I go shoplifting I go to Knightsbridge or Kensington. Years before, it would be Carnaby Street and the Kings Road. They didn't have that many buzzers. You could either pull the alarms off the clothes or just put your bag on your shoulder and walk out (because they only had waist-length alarms on the door, and if you put the bag high up, it wouldn't set the alarm off). Nowadays, they have alarms all over the door and on the ceiling, which is why today you need a good foil bag to get a decent living.

You really have got to be so careful about the alarms in the shops today – they've got magnet ones, they've got ink ones, they've got ones on chains. They even have buzzer alarms that go off in the car parks – I bet you didn't know that. So even if you do get the stuff out of the shops, you have to be careful once you're outside and really have to figure out how you are going to work in the shop and outside it before you take anything.

Good hoisters don't just grab the first pile of rubbish they see or they can get in their bag. What you take is all about how much money you are going to end up earning at the end of the day. So you really do have to plan carefully: if you are going to take expensive things, you have to know that you can sell them again – there's no point in taking things you can't sell. So you have to be a fashion critic as well as a thief. You also have to think like a security person or a policeman, to know how to take things in the first place.

One of the funniest stories I remember about shop buzzers was about one of them stick-on buzzers (I don't know why they don't use them much more, they are so simple but really effective). Obviously you can just pull them off, if you see them, but when they are all over the lining of a garment, no one's got time to pull them off one by one. Anyway, one day, it was Harrods again (I used to love their fur department – I think it was me hoisting, not the vegetarians, that led to it being closed down) and they had made it very hard to shoplift because of their new alarm system. But anyway, with my partner

David P., I managed to take seven mink coats on the first day of the sale. It was on LBC radio afterwards that thieves had cleared out Harrods fur department.

We just filled bags up and put coats down us and not a peep out of the alarms. So I was well pleased. I used to love taking mink, because you could get big money from selling it. At least a couple of grand a day, sometimes more. That's how I earned my living most of the time, in between other things, by stealing good clothes and fur and then selling them. One of my favourite tricks on the odd day when I felt worried in the shops was to create a diversion by dropping security tags in the shopping bags of regular customers. I'd snap the buzzers off some clothes on the rails and creep up behind the most respectable-looking customers, and drop the tags in their big carrier bags. By the time they got to the doors the bells would just start screaming. The person would be in shock and there'd be a massive commotion. I didn't do this often – only when I needed to – and then I'd love to pick someone really posh, who had clearly spent a nice few bob in the shop – because they always made the most fuss. While the commotion was carrying on it was easy to have a good load-up and slip out of the door undetected, with virtually anything. Often I stole to order. I knew exactly what to get my customers and, because I was in the most exclusive shops all the time, my buyers learned to trust my judgement and fashion sense. I always kept good clothes for myself and people often wanted me to get them the same as my own clothes.

Anyway, the day when we took the seven minks from Harrods, I put one of the coats aside for a girl, S., an acquaintance that lived in Bromley, because I knew it was exactly what she wanted. Her husband paid cash on the nose that night when I delivered it, and I was pleased because I wanted to take the kids out for a spend-up.

A couple of days afterwards my friend rang me and said, 'You're never gonna guess what's happened to me.' Well, I laughed all through the phone call, she was so comical despite being deadly serious. She had gone down to Bromley High Street to do her Saturday shopping, in her new mink coat, and she's got one of those naff shopping trolleys. (What a prat she must have looked in her £9,000 mink pushing an old shopping trolley.) As she's walked into the first shop the alarm went off so she ran out. She went into a

department store next, and the same thing happened again. So she goes straight home and gets her husband to go all over the coat. He couldn't find a thing on it.

So S. goes out again. The same thing happens, but this time she ignores the alarms and carries on shopping. She gets a bit of food shopping and then walks into a boutique – Chic Chic, she said it was called. She said, when she got into the shop, the shop assistants kept looking at her funny. Eventually, the manageress says to her, 'That's a nice dress you've got on.' She said, 'Thanks,' and took no notice, going off to look at what to buy. She pays for her goods. When she leaves the shop the buzzers went off again! So the woman says to her, 'Could you please come back into the shop, because, do you know what's happened, I think you've bought something and you've still got the buzzer on it. Could I have a look at your trolley? They've phoned us from the other shop, down the road, and said that as you walked over their rays, their buzzers went off all over.'

S. is cracking up by now. She said, 'Yes, you can have a look in my bag.' I mean, she's not a thief or anything, and so the manageress searched her and didn't find a thing. Then the manageress asked to look at her dress. There was nothing on her dress, so she says to S., 'What a beautiful mink.' Well this is the comment that freaks S. out. She said, 'Yes, my husband bought it for me for Christmas. Isn't it lovely?' hoping like fuck the woman's not going to examine it.

The manageress tells my friend, in a very polite way, that a buzzer may have been left on something else she has bought. Anyway, she went all over the coat and there was nothing on that either. S. breathed out as the shop assistants now say, can they look at her shoes (some shops put adhesive buzzers on the soles of shoes). Again nothing is found. So the manageress said, 'Well, I think it must be something to do with that trolley. That trolley must be setting it off somehow.'

Well, S. leaves the shop and says she couldn't get in the car quick enough. She said she knew it was the coat and as soon as she got in, her husband went all over it again. Finally, when he pulled the lining up he found the buzzer right inside, at the top, on the collar, a concealed adhesive strip. S.

said she was so relieved to find it. But I'm not sure she ever went shopping in her mink again.

I've seen some people I know, and I wouldn't do this myself, get so frustrated that they have torn the garment to get the buzzer off. Disgusting. There's no skill or art to that. Most of the women I've worked with are really good at removing buzzers, with neat little fingers, they don't ruin clothes. We've all got clippers and all you do is put the clippers over the two little holes on the buzzer and, as you press, it just releases the alarm. But you have to be patient. Some of the women I have worked with weren't always patient, but it wasn't clumsiness with security alarms that usually got spotted first but the 'wrong' appearance.

I worked with this woman once who used to get a lot of really beautiful stuff with me from Harrods, but she just wouldn't dress up. She was really good, this woman, and worked from the bag, not down her drawers, and I felt safe working with her, because she knew where to look in the shop while I rolled the things up and tucked them down me. But she really didn't like coming in the big stores with me – after we had got one thing, she would want to leave, and I was always trying to get her to dress up so we could go back in the shops over and over again. My friend just wouldn't do her hair different and I would always be nagging her to get a wig so she could change her colouring.

Well, one day we were in South Molton Street, so I took my friend up to this wig shop, which at the time was above a dentist. It was a lovely shop this one, they made beautiful hand-made wigs, and I persuaded her to make an appointment to get a wig. While my friend is arranging a time for the staff in the shop to see her, I nick two wigs. They were in boxes, and you couldn't really see what you were taking. The ones on the stands would be missed right away if I took them, so I took two out of these boxes and we left the shop without them knowing.

We go and find somewhere to have coffee and freshen up before we hit the shops again. My friend sits down and, as I come out of the toilet, I throw this wig on her. It was a black wig with curls going across, and as I put it on her, I said, 'It really suits you.' Well, my friend can't see herself, can she, and says to me, 'What do I look like?' and I said, 'Fine. You look different, but

it's really you.' So she didn't feel rotten, I put the other one on, she helps me adjust it and off we go to Browns to steal more gear.

We had a routine. We would walk into the shops separately and pretend we didn't know each other, so we could work together better. So we split up to walk into Browns separately, but as you walk in the shop, there is a big mirror right in front, and for a split second we catch each other's eye. Well, we couldn't keep a straight face. As we came face to face with each other, we just burst out laughing. My friend's in this black wig and I'm in a fucking old ginger one – we just looked so funny, they looked like judges wigs with the curls hanging round our shoulders. My friend was wearing a raincoat, and I thought to myself, we look like Gert and Daisy. Well, this set me off laughing all over again and now I've got my friend hysterical, so there is nothing for it but to go back to the car.

There are so many nutters in the West End, the people in the shop probably just thought were from one of the Christmas pantomimes and didn't take much notice of us. But when we got back to the car and our driver caught sight of us – it was Tony that time – he really started laughing, he just couldn't stop, and my friend was fucking furious. She was really wild by then to think that the driver was taking the piss out of us. After that I could never get her to wear a wig, which was a shame, because if you looked different, and worked with the right people, you could just go back to the same shops over and over again.