

THE DIAMOND THIEVES

TWELVE DETECTIVE STORIES

By ARTHUR STRINGER

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V.—The Boob from the Burdock Patch

THEY thought I was mad. The natives of that one-horse town clearly took me for a nut. And I can't altogether blame them, when I come to think it over. For it doesn't look like any to see a girl lying flat on her back in the sun, blinking up at the dome of heaven as though she were a she-Swan holding converse with the infinite.

But it wasn't converse I was after. It was two much simpler things—just freckles and tan. I had to have them, and I'd only two days to get them in. Then I darkened two of my front teeth with repeated applications of tincture of iron, braided my hair up close and tight and adorned my feet with a pair of broad-toed "essies". And, thus equipped, I made my way back to the land of my birth.

I went back to the city looking so much like the Queen of the Rubes that a one-legged small boy leaned against the Subway kiosk and called aloud to the world: "Say, Dutch, did youse pipe the boob from the burdock patch?"

I had the consolation of knowing that my destination was a rooming-house at a certain number in East Twenty-fourth Street, where my arrival had been laboriously prepared for.

Under ordinary circumstances, of course, the prospect of being a slavey in an East Side rooming-house would have proven anything but appealing to me. But in this case the circumstances were far from ordinary. Inspector Sloan, in fact, had announced that this same Twenty-fourth Street rooming-house, conducted by Mrs. Munger, held a certain old German who answered to the name of Otto Schoenfeld, and that while nothing definite as yet was known as to Schoenfeld's activities, there seemed to be certain substantial reasons for investigating that mild-mannered old German and his manner of life.

That was all I knew. But it was enough. Mrs. Munger, I soon found was not the type of woman to make my task an over-luxuriously easy one. Under her soft and billowy form, I saw, resided a heart of granite. Besides four long flights of stairs to climb, there were beds to make, halls to be swept, washings to be carried to the roof, towels to be ironed, bells to be answered and a hundred and one other odd errands to be run. I was installed in a sulphur-colored cubbyhole on the top floor.

To this, however, I offered no objection, for the one other occupant of that top floor was a mild-mannered old couple by the name of Schoenfeld.

As for Otto Schoenfeld himself, he gave every promise of proving about as shy as a springbok. He vanished like a shadow. I found, at the first sign of my approach. It wasn't until my third day as a slavey, in fact, that I got a good look at him.

It wasn't until the fourth day that I had a chance to visit his quarters, climbing the three long flights with a frugal parcel of laundry for which I was instructed to collect thirty-two cents. I could hear the hum of machinery as I repeated my knock on his door. I could also hear the sound of a bolt being withdrawn as old Otto answered that knock.

His work, I soon discovered, involved the continuous receipt and despatch of carefully boxed spectacle-lenses. Sometimes they came by messenger, and sometimes they came by registered special delivery. But always they were delivered personally at Otto Schoenfeld's door. It was impressed on me, from the first that all such packages were to go at once to that top-floor optician.

I had two days of toil before I found myself presented with a chance of even so much as penetrating the enemy's entrenchments. My chance came with a curt order, from the mountainous Mrs. Munger, to wash Schoenfeld's windows. He held out a coin to me and asked me if I'd first run out to a Third Avenue grocery and buy some cuttle-bone for his canaries.

The boob from the burdock patch prided herself on seeing through that glass, but she went without a murmur.

On my return with the cuttle-bone Otto Schoenfeld was all ready to receive me. Then he locked me inside, pointed out that he wanted me to be especially careful of his photograph plates on the window-sills.

Along one wall ran a wide work-bench. Installed under this bench was an electric dynamo, a huge galvanized can with a funnel on its top obviously to catch drip, and a lidless bread-box as a receptacle for glass chips and the bench refused to collect thirty-two cents. A large smooth-rimmed grindstone, connected with the dynamo, with a small drip-can adjusted above it. This was plainly an automatic grinding-wheel for shaping and polishing lenses.

Against the opposite wall stood a cabinet of stock lenses. About the walls were hung highly complex charts of the human eye, and a couple of calendars bearing the name of manufacturing opticians, together with an advertising sign announcing: "The Schoenfeld Toric Will Save Your Eyes."

When later in the day I communicated this information to Sloan himself, he said: "Get his finger-prints."

Another two days slipped by, however before I had a chance. It presented itself when Mrs. Munger sent me up to the second floor back with a box of collars to be delivered to the vaudeville acrobat residing therein. But instead of taking that box to the second-floor back I climbed to the top of the house and knocked on Otto Schoenfeld's door.

"I guess them's for you!"

"Not for me, leedle girl," he said with good-natured forbearance, as he handed the parcel back to me. I gaped at him gratefully, and backed away. But once that door was relocked I had the satisfaction of seeing the wrapping-paper about the collar-box clearly impressed with the loops and whorls of a thumb

and forefinger slightly stained with oil. And before I presented the box to its rightful owner I'd torn away the necessary portion of wrapping-paper.

By noon this was on his way to the Inspector's office. Before night an answering message had reached me. It read: "Watch that man like a hawk."

So I watched Otto Schoenfeld more closely, and in doing so made a number of discoveries. One was that the old German had a habit of slipping out late at night and remaining away for a couple of hours. Another was that the different-sized plate-holders which he kept in a row on his window-ledge were not there for the printing of photographs. The order of their arrangement, in fact, was altered day by day, and my immediate inference was that they were being used as an ingenious sort of signaling to the back window of some room or office on the north side of Twenty-third Street. I also discovered that certain messengers repeated their calls on Schoenfeld and showed every evidence of a desire to avoid my observation.

But my most urgent need, I began to realize, was to obtain admission to that old German's workroom. It could never be done, I also discovered, by means of my "spider," since an especially intricate spring-iron guard that they were being used as an ingenious sort of signaling to the back window of some room or office on the north side of Twenty-third Street. I also discovered that certain messengers repeated their calls on Schoenfeld and showed every evidence of a desire to avoid my observation.

So instinctively I moved up the remaining three steps of the stairway, clinging to the banisters and watching him at each step. It wasn't until I reached the hall floor that he either moved or spoke.

"Excuse, please," he said in his full-voiced Latin intonation. "I make one beeg meastal, I tink!"

There was a note of irony, of mockery, I'm sure, in that apology of his. But it wasn't that that caught my attention. It was more the soft and panther-like quickness with which he stepped past me, down the stairs, took the turn, and continued on his way to the street.

I knew, as I heard the street door close that the cat was out of the bag. I could no longer see in that house as a boob from the burdock patch. I was discovered. Pareto and Schoenfeld were working together, hand and glove, and anything that was to be done would have to be done before those two came together.

I made a pretense of preparing for bed, but it was a pretense and nothing more. Then I unceremoniously revolver and slipped it under my pillow. Sleep, I knew was out of the question. I sat on my hard little bed with its hundred and one humps and waited for the unexpected.

And the unexpected came. It came in the form of a stealthy step to my door. It was a mysteriously studied step, a step that sent a little shiver along my spine.

"You will hat more from me ven dis is ofer, dan Mrs. Munger vill offer gif you." He shuffled back toward the door, as though the entire matter were finally settled. "So now I vill bring de trunk and fix dat lock-bolt on dis door of yours!"

I stood there listening as his quiet yet heavy tread passed along the little hallway wondering what my course of action ought to be. Then I heard him shuffling back along the hall and whispering for me to turn on the light.

He had come in through the narrow door sideways, for he was carrying the oak chest by its two iron handles. He toddled across the room to my iron bed, pushed it under the bed. Then he reached into his coat pocket and lifted out a screw-driver and a wrought-iron lock-bolt. Reaching into another pocket he took out some screw-nails, held the bolt against the edge of my door, and proceeded to fasten it there.

On the frame of the door he screwed a loop of iron into which this bolt could slide. Then he closed the door and slid the bolt back and forth several times to make sure that it worked.

"Lock yourself in—so—and it will be all right," he said with a reassuring smile. And before I could say another word to him he had slipped out through the door and disappeared within his own quarters.

I promptly closed and bolted my door, crossed to the bed, and cautiously pulled the mysterious chest a little out

from behind Otto Schoenfeld's door.

I backed away, instinctively, until I came to the foot of the stairs that led to the roof-hatch, for here the shadow was deepest and a way to the open stood closest behind me. Then I took advantage of that avenue of escape. I went up, those narrow stairs, step by step, holding my breath, for at the same time that my straining ears caught the sound of steps advancing up through the house I heard Otto Schoenfeld's door open and the snap of the spring-lock which held me. It had been swung shut again. I recognized the stealthy shuffle as the old German crossed to the head of the stairs and listened there for a moment or two. But I took advantage of that diversion to scurry up the remaining steps to the roof and slip out through the door which I had come to know tolerably well in my daily activities with Mrs. Munger's clothes-basket.

My attention, as I did so, was attracted by the winking of a flashlight from one of the windows of the Twenty-third street office-building facing me. This reminded me of Schoenfeld's window-sill arrangement of plate-frames and of the fact that even in that uncertain light I might be visible to some unknown accomplice signaling from that office-building. So I crouched there behind a sheltering chimney-tier, in the shadow of a wall coping.

My eyes had got more used to the darkness by this time, and uncertain as was the light along that broken tier of roofs, I could make out what was taking place so close to where I lay hidden. I could see the roof deck door swing back and the heavy figure slowly shoulder out through it. I knew at a glance that it was Otto Schoenfeld himself. From his left hand hung a long and narrow laundry-bag, tied at the top. In his right hand, which he held doubled up close to his chest, he held an automatic, and as he backed stealthily out through the narrow door his attention was directed toward some person or persons who seemed to be threatening him from within the house.

But that threatened interference, apparently was something only of the instant. For the next moment he dropped the bag to the roof, swung the door shut, and wedged it in that position with a screw-driver which he took from one of his pockets. Then, after pressing his ear against the door for several moments, in an attitude of listening, he caught up the laundry-bag again and crept along the roof until he came to where the clothes-line swayed in the night breeze. The next moment I saw him cut this clothes-line away from its stanchions. He crept back to a row of three chimneys in one that stood at the easterly edge of the house-roof, pushed his bag down inside the middle chimney and let it hang there by the clothes-line, after wedging the upper end of the cotton rope in between two chimney bricks where the mortar had been torn away. Then I saw him cut off the few inches of rope that protruded, so that even in daylight small evidence would remain to show the spot where he had so ingeniously but involuntarily repeated a device which is supposed to be peculiar to Santa Claus alone.

Then my heavy-footed friend felt his way carefully to the back of the roof. There I saw him reach into his pocket and lift something out. What he now held in his right hand was a pocket flashlight and with it he was plainly signaling to the window of his unknown confederate. The next minute, in fact, I could see the answering wink of a corresponding light in the fourth floor window. Then the series of flashes suddenly stopped and Otto Schoenfeld himself crept cautiously back to the roof door and leaned forward with his ear pressed against its surface. For below stairs certain more or less interesting things were plainly taking place. I could hear the sound of sudden and shattering blows, like those an axe would make in smashing in a door, followed by shouts and calls, and the thump of hurrying feet. It sounded to me remarkably like a police raid. Schoenfeld was sitting on the roof and engaged in solemnly removing his shoes. This done, he pulled his screw-driver wedge away from the door where it had held that door shut, picked up his shoes, and pussyfooted cautiously across the roof until he came to the very wall-coping against which I pressed. He clambered gruntingly over the coping, within ten feet of where I lay holding my breath. With his gaze still fixed on that door he reached into a pocket and took out his automatic, which he placed carefully on the top of the wall coping. I knew better than to move. It was the man on the other side of the wall, in fact, who did the moving. He had caught up his shoes in one hand, and his pistol in the other, and was apparently about to adventure further along those uneven housetops when the roof-door through which he had so recently passed swung open with a thump. A flashlight suddenly exploded on the darkness, a much stronger flash than that used by the German. It wavered and danced inquiringly about the empty roof for a moment or two and then went out as suddenly as it had appeared. And still again I lay in my sheltering shadow, scarcely daring to breathe. Then I was startled by a small sound that was made by a pair of heavy shoes being placed on the wall directly over my head. By rising one elbow I could just see the tops of them. And I was hoping against hope that the automatic would be placed there beside them. But the seconds slipped away and no such movement took place. So I quietly reached up and lifted one of the shoes from its resting-place. Stinking down again, I threw that shoe lightly and silently up over the house cornice. A few seconds later I could hear the faint thud of sound as it struck the street pavement.

Then I reached up and took possession of the second shoe. I was about

to repeat the process with this remaining shoe when whatever happened a shoeless man would always be an easy quarry to follow when a grant of surprise sounded from the wall-top no three feet away from my head. I could hear the interrogative pawing of a hand along the coping-tiles and the crackle of the tin roof as the body on the other side of the bricks scrambled to an upright position. To reach that position it was necessary for the nose-see limber-jointed German to grasp the edge of the coping-tile. The extraordinary feature of the whole thing was the fact that the hand which pawed for a clutch along the glazed corner of the tile held an automatic pistol in its fingers. I could not see it clearly but I could see it clearly enough to understand what it was. And in my own right hand I still held that empty shoe. But instead of flinging it out into space, as I had at first intended, I did something quite different. Holding it by the toe, I brought its heavy heel down with all my power on the fingers clustered about the pistol-hole. These fingers, I so happened to rest on the thick coping-tile as the hand fell. As I struck the second time I had the satisfaction of seeing the automatic knocked free of the relaxed fingers. That side-blow was strong enough, in fact, to send it rattling to the roof-tin, where it skidded along the gentle slope and dropped out of sight.

My next movement was a prompt even though an essentially ludicrous one. We each rose to our feet, facing each other across that narrow wall-top which came scarily to the waist. And we each eagerly and immediately reached out for the other.

I knew there could and would be no half-measures in that house-top fight with Otto Schoenfeld. And my knowledge, I knew, was that he was a fighting fellow. From his left hand hung a long and narrow laundry-bag, tied at the top. In his right hand, which he held doubled up close to his chest, he held an automatic, and as he backed stealthily out through the narrow door his attention was directed toward some person or persons who seemed to be threatening him from within the house.

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But that threatened interference, apparently was something only of the instant. For the next moment he dropped the bag to the roof, swung the door shut, and wedged it in that position with a screw-driver which he took from one of his pockets. Then, after pressing his ear against the door for several moments, in an attitude of listening, he caught up the laundry-bag again and crept along the roof until he came to where the clothes-line swayed in the night breeze. The next moment I saw him cut this clothes-line away from its stanchions. He crept back to a row of three chimneys in one that stood at the easterly edge of the house-roof, pushed his bag down inside the middle chimney and let it hang there by the clothes-line, after wedging the upper end of the cotton rope in between two chimney bricks where the mortar had been torn away. Then I saw him cut off the few inches of rope that protruded, so that even in daylight small evidence would remain to show the spot where he had so ingeniously but involuntarily repeated a device which is supposed to be peculiar to Santa Claus alone.

Then my heavy-footed friend felt his way carefully to the back of the roof. There I saw him reach into his pocket and lift something out. What he now held in his right hand was a pocket flashlight and with it he was plainly signaling to the window of his unknown confederate. The next minute, in fact, I could see the answering wink of a corresponding light in the fourth floor window. Then the series of flashes suddenly stopped and Otto Schoenfeld himself crept cautiously back to the roof door and leaned forward with his ear pressed against its surface. For below stairs certain more or less interesting things were plainly taking place. I could hear the sound of sudden and shattering blows, like those an axe would make in smashing in a door, followed by shouts and calls, and the thump of hurrying feet. It sounded to me remarkably like a police raid. Schoenfeld was sitting on the roof and engaged in solemnly removing his shoes. This done, he pulled his screw-driver wedge away from the door where it had held that door shut, picked up his shoes, and pussyfooted cautiously across the roof until he came to the very wall-coping against which I pressed. He clambered gruntingly over the coping, within ten feet of where I lay holding my breath. With his gaze still fixed on that door he reached into a pocket and took out his automatic, which he placed carefully on the top of the wall coping. I knew better than to move. It was the man on the other side of the wall, in fact, who did the moving. He had caught up his shoes in one hand, and his pistol in the other, and was apparently about to adventure further along those uneven housetops when the roof-door through which he had so recently passed swung open with a thump. A flashlight suddenly exploded on the darkness, a much stronger flash than that used by the German. It wavered and danced inquiringly about the empty roof for a moment or two and then went out as suddenly as it had appeared. And still again I lay in my sheltering shadow, scarcely daring to breathe. Then I was startled by a small sound that was made by a pair of heavy shoes being placed on the wall directly over my head. By rising one elbow I could just see the tops of them. And I was hoping against hope that the automatic would be placed there beside them. But the seconds slipped away and no such movement took place. So I quietly reached up and lifted one of the shoes from its resting-place. Stinking down again, I threw that shoe lightly and silently up over the house cornice. A few seconds later I could hear the faint thud of sound as it struck the street pavement.

Then I reached up and took possession of the second shoe. I was about to repeat the process with this remaining shoe when whatever happened a shoeless man would always be an easy quarry to follow when a grant of surprise sounded from the wall-top no three feet away from my head. I could hear the interrogative pawing of a hand along the coping-tiles and the crackle of the tin roof as the body on the other side of the bricks scrambled to an upright position. To reach that position it was necessary for the nose-see limber-jointed German to grasp the edge of the coping-tile. The extraordinary feature of the whole thing was the fact that the hand which pawed for a clutch along the glazed corner of the tile held an automatic pistol in its fingers. I could not see it clearly but I could see it clearly enough to understand what it was. And in my own right hand I still held that empty shoe. But instead of flinging it out into space, as I had at first intended, I did something quite different. Holding it by the toe, I brought its heavy heel down with all my power on the fingers clustered about the pistol-hole. These fingers, I so happened to rest on the thick coping-tile as the hand fell. As I struck the second time I had the satisfaction of seeing the automatic knocked free of the relaxed fingers. That side-blow was strong enough, in fact, to send it rattling to the roof-tin, where it skidded along the gentle slope and dropped out of sight.

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ICROUCHED THERE MOTITLESS, WATCHING THAT REPEATED AND MYSTERIOUS WINK OF LIGHT.

for me, were the names that Sloan and his agents had spent fruitless weeks in trying to find.

I wanted that book and that list more than anything else. But would it be safe for me to carry it away?

I thought it over, there on my knees beside the open trunk, and decided to restore the book to where I had found it. I carefully replaced the tray, relocked the trunk