

Education

The Delancey Street Boosters

By Anne C. Dowie

■ Certain members of the Delancey Street family have been slipping out early these cold mornings and back into some of their old "street ways." Before the very eyes of retail merchants, store managers, clerks and security guards, they pilfer the merchandise, scam the cashiers out of a fast five or ten dollars, and fake epileptic fits as a distracting cover for their partners-in-crime. And, not only are they never accosted or arrested, they are getting well paid for this display of craft. For the merchants and managers themselves have hired them to perform their skills before retailer audiences in the hope that it will help the retailers curtail the rising cost of loss through theft.

Police records indicate shoplifting is "the fastest growing larceny violation in the nation" and happens to the tune of \$3.5 billion a year. It also happens to be the way some of the more than 300 people now at the Delancey Street Foundation's Pacific Heights facilities once made a living and stayed high. Now the shoplifting seminars are one way they support Delancey Street and their new, rehabilitated life style.

The assembled retailers of the Tanforan Park Shopping Center are packed together in the audience area set up for a sunrise performance in the central mall by the Delancey Street group.

The cast, in order of appearance: Tommy Grapshi, age 43, white, male; Morris Hodges, age 58, black, male; Jain Ruvitch, age 23, white, female; and Alice Smith, age 25, black, female. Their qualifications to give this seminar are impeccable. They are masters of the art.

The curtain goes up on Tommy Grapshi, formerly "one of five most wanted" boosters in New York City, together on stage with Morris Hodges, who for 31 years enjoyed national notoriety in the same profession. They are perusing the men's suits and pretending not to know each other. Tommy holds up two and rolls up one. Then with

Education continued

reveals the loot. Gasps. He bows. Applause. Then, back on with the jacket for a quick round of roll it, stuff it, and act nonchalant. He makes it seem simple to get a new pair of slacks inside your jacket and outside the store.

In the old days, what made Tommy run was his nerve. He got to where he would just walk out of a department store with a whole drawer full of Parker '51 pens, or a stack of boxes filled with gold charms, or a handful of Rollex "Oysters," or a couple of \$400 alligator handbags. If any customers happened to notice, they either didn't believe their eyes or were too afraid to say anything, for they never interfered.

Morris is stepping off the stage now as if to join the audience. Walking as he does in everyday life with the help of a cane, he suddenly falls spread-eagled at their feet and lies there shrieking and convulsing. Tommy, playing the part of the accommodating cashier, leaps to his aid. And, while the audience sits dumbstruck, half convinced it's the real thing, Alice sidles up to the unattended cash register and fills her hand-



Silk ties are stuffed inside the sleeves of the shoplifter's jacket



It takes two to till-tap (left), or play stuff-the-box.

Morris' left hand, up goes the trap door in his hidden spring-loaded booster box, in goes the suit, and snap! it's gone (capacity, three suits).

If Tommy Grapshi was "one of the five most wanted" he must have been one of the five most gotten; beginning in 1955, he was never out of jail for more than six months at a time. All told, he has spent 17 of his 43 years behind bars. If it wasn't shoplifting, it was selling dope or picking pockets. "Before you know it, that's all you know," says Tommy.

Cut to scene two and there is Jain, looking for all the world like every father wishes his daughter would grow up to be — pretty, bright, healthy and tastefully hip — but who once lived out every father's nightmare. Like many middle class teenage runaways, she became hooked on heroin. There were days when she would go running through back alleys with the police in hot pursuit having just watched her score; and others when she would go stumbling through the streets, puking in alleyways, looking for a friend to help her through another attempt at withdrawal.

Now she is busy whispering to Tommy the salesman that he should be keeping an eye on "that shifty looking black woman

bag with the day's receipts. Now it is the audience who is convulsed — in embarrassed laughter.

On the street, Morris' role in the above scenario is known as "the stall," and the one who does the heist is "the wire." From age 11 when he was first turned on to drugs in Chicago until he entered Synanon at 43, Morris pulled a lot of "stalls." His specialty was to go into a fine fur salon with an attractive woman on his arm. While he was flashing his "Michigan bankroll" and distracting the salesperson, his accomplice tried on sables and minks until she found the most expensive one. It would go into her "boosting bloomers," and she and Morris would go out the door again arm in arm, promising to return when they had decided which one they wanted.

The next scene opens with Jain at the cash register as the friendly cashier. "Hey," says she with her winning smile, "I like your face. Why don't you give me a ten for that \$11.95 item." The elated customer runs off rejoicing and the ten goes straight into Jain's pocket without the register being any the wiser for making change.

Jain's performances at the cash register number in the hundreds, but not always with an audience. The atmosphere in the "head shops" where she worked in New

York and Boston was most conducive to this and other embezzling routines. She more than doubled her pay each week.

Meanwhile, back at the seminar, along comes Morris, asking for a pack of cigarettes. Leaning heavily on his cane, he reaches clumsily across the counter to hand Jain the money, lurches slightly and, oops, the coins miss her hand and clatter to the floor at her feet. Effusive apologies on both sides. Jain no sooner stoops down to gather them up, than, faster than you can focus, Morris' hand is in the till raking in a handful of bills.

The spotlight scans back to Tommy. He has invited one of the store managers to come up on stage and is giving him another insight into the con game. "Be sure you get them with the goods, or beware of false arrest suits and those who will try to lead you into them." Just then, Morris steps on stage, and, in the split second that the manager's attention is diverted, Tommy steals his wallet. The audience breaks into laughter and applause. The gig is up.

"Actually," recalls Tommy, "I used to find it easier to get into women's handbags while the ladies were preoccupied in shops or movies. The showing of *Ben Hur* was my biggest hit. I probably got upwards of \$10,000 in the year that it ran in New York, and about \$8000 of that during the big chariot race." □

Photography: Anne C. Dowie