



The Fox and the Flies: The Secret Life of a Grotesque Master Criminal

Charles van Onselen

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A masterwork of historical reconstruction?the life and times of an arch criminal who may well have been Jack the Ripper.

During the three turbulent decades before World War I, Joseph Silver became the greatest criminal of his time, perfecting his skills as a burglar, gun runner, jewel thief, and ultimately trafficker in prostitution and female slavery across four continents. He was notorious even among his competitors at a time when such business was rampant on both sides of the Atlantic, and he covered his tracks with extraordinary skill.

A chance encounter with Silver's career in South Africa set Charles van Onselen on a twenty five-year obsession: a journey to reconstruct the shadowy life and times of?in some ways to match wits with?a devious master criminal. From Russian Poland in the 1860s, where Silver was born Joseph Lis, to London in the 1880s, turn-of-the-century New York, Argentina, and Africa, van Onselen recaptures the dangerous demimonde of the Atlantic world. Silver's notoriety was found among the most confidential correspondence of a dozen countries; what those in law enforcement kept to themselves, however, was how their officers had attempted to use Silver as an informer to infiltrate syndicates built on vice, only to have him outwit them as he moved in the risky space between police and prostitutes.

Such is the meticulousness of van Onselen's research that *The Fox and the Flies* is as rich in history as it is in the detail and drama of Silver's career, as layer after layer of his life and times are revealed. And it has an extraordinary pay-off, for van Onselen contends that Joseph Silver's darkest secret of all lay in London in the autumn of 1888 when, before he embarked on his legendary life of crime, he was, indeed, Jack the Ripper.

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