

The luck of the drawers

Duncan Campbell on how the Queen of the Shoplifters was brought to book

WHEN SHIRLEY PITTS was buried, three years ago next Monday, a floral tribute in the shape of a Harrods shopping bag and another with the words "Gone shopping" in giant letters were placed at her grave. She was the Queen of the Shoplifters and the funeral was a royal one.

The Guardian covered her farewell with a picture and report on the back page. There was a lively response from readers: half were angry that the paper should appear to celebrate the life of a woman who was essentially just a thief, when a trade union leader or charity worker's death would never have merited such coverage. The other half were in the film business: they wanted to know who had the rights to her story.

Now that story has finally appeared, as dictated to lecturer and writer Lorraine Gamman, a friend who taped and recorded Shirley

Pitts's story before she died of cancer. It carries on its cover the endorsement "One of the old school — Ronnie Kray" and it is one of the few biographies of a professional woman criminal of our times.

Janie Jones, who was jailed for running call girls in 1973, wrote *The Devil And Miss Jones*, an unremarkable account of her life, which was published in 1993 and traded heavily on the fact that Jones had known Myra Hindley in prison. Zoe Progl, a fraudster, thief and general good-time girl, wrote a more entertaining autobiography, *Queen Of The Underworld*, which came out in 1963. In it, she recounted all the tricks of the trade and shared her memories of dead gangsters like Tommy "Scarface" Smithson, murdered in Maida Vale in 1956 and famous for ramming people's faces into walls.

The woman with the most remarkable professional crime tale to tell,

Lilian Goldstein, never committed it to paper. She was a young middle-class woman from Wembley Park in north London who was known in the twenties as the "Bobbed-Haired Bandit". She drove a Mercedes getaway car and teamed up with Ruby Sparks, the best-known smash-and-grab man of the era. (When Ruby cut himself in the process of breaking a window, he held the cut together with bulldog clips and Goldstein stitched him up later.) They worked together on robberies in the Home Counties for half a dozen years before Sparks was put away. Goldstein was jailed for six months but served only three weeks because she was deemed to have acted out of her "womanly" attachment to Sparks.

Little did they know. Goldstein bowed out of her life of crime with great panache, telling Sparks: "I've had enough of this bandit queen lark." One of the few female armed



The real Shirley Pitts . . .

robbers of our time, now aged 40, is contemplating her own memoirs at this very moment, but essentially the crown of villainy has passed down the male line.

Shirley Pitts started thieving at the age of seven, taking milk and bread from doorsteps "because her family were hungry". Certainly she grew up in what can only be



. . . and in disguise

described as a criminal family: her father died in Parkhurst in 1962, her beloved brother Adgie, a bank robber, died in a car smash in Haywards Heath and another brother, Charlie, was convicted of a particularly nasty kidnapping in 1984.

In the meantime, Shirley was shoplifting her way across the continent, hitting Harrods where it hurts and

lavishing her money on her family of seven, one of whom features in the book at his graduation ceremony with proud mother by his side. She may well have started thieving to stave off hunger but ended up sometimes spending £2,000 a week on clothes and the same sort of sum on toys for her grandchildren.

She was tutored in shoplifting by Alice Diamond, an enormous woman from the Elephant and Castle, herself known as the Queen of the Forty Thieves, "with diamonds on her fingers and fox furs round her neck". But she was an attractive young woman and made money by picking up kerb-crawlers in the West End, pretending she was a prostitute, leaving them with her (previously stolen) handbag in their car to reassure them and then disappearing with their money.

Using her "lucky drawers" for shoplifting, Pitts would stuff the stolen furs out of sight. "I used to love Harrods' fur department. I think it was me hoisting, not the vegetarians, that led to it being closed down." On one occasion, she posed as a mannequin in a shop window to escape the store detectives.

She took her brand of shoplifting, hitting the expensive stores — Marks & Spencer will be gratified to hear that she didn't think them worth the

bother — and travelling across Europe in search of fresh perfume and jewels.

There were also the big scams did not quite come off: "If that job gone the way it should have gone I would now be living in Oran. Sharif's house in Lanzarote was carved out of a mountain."

The tricks of the trade are revealed, including putting foil in bags to stop the security buzzers clothes setting off the alarms. One favourite stunt was to remove the buzzers inside the store and pop them in the most "respectable-looking" customers' bags when they were looking. Then, when the unfortunate patsy tried to leave the store, the buzzers would ring and a helpful diversion would have been created.

"Of course crime pays," she says on the last page of the book. "It's getting caught that's the fucking problem." Shirley Pitts herself was jailed three times.

She was buried, so it says in the book — and so I reported at the time so it must be true — in a £5,000 stoneware Zandra Rhodes dress, "acquired specially for the occasion".

Gone Shopping: The Story Of Shirley Pitts, Queen Of Thieves by Lorraine Gamman is published by Signet, March 25 at £5.99.

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