The luck of the drawee

Duncan Campbell

on how the Queen of the Shoplifters was brought to book

When Shirley Pitts was arrested on Monday, a floral tribute in the shape of a Harrods shopping bag & spencer will be granted to the woman who was the Queen of the Shoplifters and the funeral was a royal one. The Guardian covered her farew well with a picture and report on the back page. The relatively response from readers: half were angry that the paper had apparently celebrated 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. The story that has appeared, as dictated to lecturer and writer Shirley Pitts by the woman who taped and recorded Shirley Pitts's story before she died of cancer. It carries on the 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.

Jannie Jones, whose family are working class women from Wembury Park in north London who were known in the twenties as the "Black-haired Bandit". She drove a Mercedes get-away 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 building clips and Goldstein brooch (stitching him up later.) They worked together out all his time in the same 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 shoplifting lack." One of the few female armed robbers of our time, now aged 40, is completing her own memoir at this very moment, but essentially the crown's villain has passed down the needle line.

Shirley Pitts started shoplifting 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 described as a criminal family: her father died in Parkhurst in 1963, 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

lashing her money on her family of seven, one of whom features in the book at graduation ceremony with her grandson by her side. She may well have started shoplifting to save off hunger but ended up some times spending $2,000 a week on clothes and the same sort of sum on toys for her grandchildren. She was rendered in shoplifting by Shirley, who was a livein companion from the Elephant and Castle, known as the Queen of the Fur Thieves, "with diamonds hanging from the fur on her neck." But she was not an attractive young woman and made money by picking up bags of crawlers in the West End, pretending she was a prostitute, leaving with her (previously stolen) handbag in their car and then and then disappearing with their money as well.

Using her "lucky defenders" for shoplifting, Pitts would stuff the stolen furs out of sight. "I used to love Harrods" for department, I think it was being holed, not the vegetarina, that led to me being closed down." On one occasion, she posed as a mannequin in a shop window to escape being detectives. She took back the word of shoplifting, hitting the expensive stores — Marks & Spencer who she had to steal from, that she didn't think them worth the bother — and traveling across Europe in search of fresh perl and jewels.

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

The tricks of the trade are learned, including putting foil, bags to stop the security boxes clothes setting off the alarm. The thiefs feigned insult to the shop to leave the store and ring a most "respectable looking customers" looking. Then, when the unfitting clothes were to leave the store, the shop would ring a helpful deviation.

"Of course crime pays," she says on the last page of the book. "It's a get rich quick problem." Shirley Pitts herself is still alive three times. She was buried, as it says in the book, and so reported it the time it is not so — in 1959, she was unknown in Croydon, behind a shop.

Some Shopping: The Queen Of Thieves by Les Gamman is published by Quercus £25.99.