

# Thieves Three

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THE girl first came under Red Rooney's notice when she entered the bus somewhere uptown. But then he had not paid particular attention to her. He had merely noticed that she was more than ordinarily comely, that she was garbed in a modish suit and that there was about her an air of both breeding and refinement.

Red Rooney was quick to notice things. It was part of his business to be observing; he was a pickpocket by profession and his stock in trade consisted of a pair of keen, discriminating eyes and nervous, agile fingers.

When the bus invaded the uptown business section of the city, the dip for the first time began to take a decided interest in the girl. This interest was inspired by a quaintly-patterned beaded bag the girl carried. It was when she opened the bag that she first attracted Rooney's attention. She delved into its depths, and produced a tiny powder puff, holding the bag elevated so that she might peer into a small mirror and dust her pretty nose.

As she performed, this delicate operation, Rooney, without moving, allowed his gaze to sweep over her shoulder and to focus on the interior of the beaded bag.

What he beheld caused quick thrills to surge through him. His eyes fell on a fat roll of money. The top note of the wad was engraved with three figures. Then, as the dip feasted his optics on it, the girl replaced her powder puff, and in doing so, shifted the contents of the bag, revealing the sparkle of a number of rings. Rooney felt his sensitive fingers twitching, as the girl snapped an emerald catch on the bag and dropped it to her silken lap.

In front of the new Hotel St. Charles she alighted. Rooney, twisting about, saw her enter its impressive entrance. At the block below, he too got off and hurried back to the hostelry. As he entered the lobby, he saw the girl vanishing into the Persian tea room.

The dip chuckled to himself, sauntering to the cigar counter where he purchased an expensive

weed. In the Persian room were music and dancing. He always worked best where there were gaiety and people. Somehow, he thought, these things inspired him to take chances and to escape, where under other circumstances he might hesitate. He had not the slightest doubt he would soon make the beaded bag his irrevocably. Red Rooney had great confidence in his own ability.

Then as he clipped the end from his cigar, lighted it, and took a step forward, he gave an imperceptible start. A man had entered the lobby of the St. Charles; a slim, well-dressed young man with a flower in his buttonhole. At sight of him, Rooney stepped behind a convenient pillar, with a muttered exclamation. He recognized the newcomer immediately. The man was no other than a well-known crook, known throughout the underworld as The Deacon. Moreover, The Deacon knew *him* well by sight and reputation.

The dip cursed softly as he saw the new arrival cross the lobby and enter the Persian room. Any attempt now to lift the beaded bag must be made under the eyes of The Deacon. And the crook had an unpleasant reputation for butting in on other people's affairs.

After a moment, Rooney flicked the ash from his Havana and entered the room himself. The place was comfortably crowded. In a circle made by a ring of small, wicker tables, an animated throng danced to the strains of a Negro jazz orchestra. Rooney dropped into a chair at a vacant table and gave his order to a pacing waiter. He made a mental note that he could well afford to spend a little money in pleasure. Business had been good with him of late, and the pigskin wallet in his pocket was well tilled with crisp bank notes.

He let his gaze wander about the room. After an interval, he discovered the girl of the bus. She was seated in the extreme rear of the place and before her was a tall, frosty glass containing some iced beverage. She sat alone and had dropped the beaded bag to the table top where it glittered oddly under the garish glow of the smoke-obscured

lights. At an adjoining table sat The Deacon, puffing a cigarette imperturbably, but Rooney saw that the man's keen eyes were appraising both the girl and the bag.

Hot rage tingled within him. He had spotted the girl first, and had marked her for his own prey. To have the debonair Deacon intrude at the moment when the snatch was to be made filled him with both anger and dismay. His nails bit deep into the palms of his hands.

A half hour danced by. The room grew more crowded. The waiters, hurrying on their errands, moved more rapidly. The drone of voices deepened. Under other circumstances Red Rooney would have delighted at the filling up of the Persian room. He enjoyed working among crowds, but now the prospect brought him no sense of elation. He dared not approach the table of the girl or make any effort to steal the bag while The Deacon held her table under scrutiny. For one thing, the man would surely intercept him. If not he would interfere and demand a rake-off. Rooney knew the crook's reputation well. The Deacon was rather noted for the clever way he had of wriggling out of tight corners, and of conveniently shifting the responsibility of his crimes onto the shoulders of others. Rooney knew of two or three men who were doing time in the stir up the Hudson because they had been unfortunate enough to have mixed into The Deacon's affairs.

The dip moved his gaze back to the table of the girl. An elderly man had picked a way through the congestion and was bowing to her. The two conversed together. Then, the orchestra, full of strange melody and queer rhythm, swung into the music of a fox trot and the man nodded toward the center of the floor. It was evident he was asking her to dance with him. The girl rose to her feet. She caught up the beaded bag, swung her arm through the loop, letting it dangle from her crooked elbow. The pair moved out to the floor and trotted off to a blare of syncopation.

Rooney watched them as they revolved in the small circle. The girl was laughing and chatting. The bag on her arm bobbed with every step she took. The dip almost hoped it would open and spill out its contents. Half a loaf was better than nothing. He would have the satisfaction, too, of knowing that the watcher at the other table would get nothing.

The dance over, Rooney, staring, became aware that the table of The Deacon was vacant. The man himself, he saw, was pressing through the

crowd, coming off the floor close to where the girl of the bus stood. A number of people passing before the dip's table shut off his view. He stood up to see better. As he did so, his lips tightened to a thin, red streak. Over the bent arm of the girl hung the loop of the beaded bag, *but there was nothing at either end of the ornamental strap!*

In a flash Rooney understood. The Deacon, with lightning like swiftness and precision, had cut away the bag without alarming the girl!

The dip wheeled about, madness possessing him. The trick had been neatly done, but The Deacon must still be somewhere about. As he looked, Rooney saw the man passing through the portals of the room. With a haste that bore no hint of politeness, the dip elbowed a way to the door and emerged into the lobby. As he came out he saw the crook disappearing down a flight of thickly-carpeted stairs. Without hesitation Rooney followed, his mind a red cauldron of rage.

On the floor below was a deserted grillroom. Beyond were located the wash rooms and the barber shop of the hotel. The Deacon, flushed with success, was making for a quiet spot where he might empty the bag and rid himself of it. Rooney knew this. He had often done the same thing himself.

The crook passed through a darkened foyer and entered a narrow corridor. Close behind him the dip followed, his rubber-soled shoes making no noise on the tiled floor. Down the corridor lay the wash rooms, protected by heavy swinging doors. Through these doors The Deacon hurried, and behind him followed Rooney. The room into which he entered was tenanted only by a sleeping bootblack. As Rooney halted, The Deacon drew the beaded bag from under his coat and, with quiet satisfaction, fumbled with the catch.

It was then that the other came into action. With a snarl, Rooney flung himself forward and swung his clenched fist with all the power he was capable of. The blow caught The Deacon behind the ear and he fell to his knees, releasing the bag. Rooney snatched it up and ran for the doors. But the crook was not out of the game yet. Dizzily he gathered himself together, and stumbled after the retreating figure of the dip. Outside, Rooney halted, his lips drawn back in a grim smile. The situation was made to order for him. He caught one of the doors, held it back and waited until the crook appeared in the entrance. When he did, the door was released and swung sharply back with a creak of its powerful hinges. There came the sound

of a muffled grunt; then a dull thud.

Holding the bag tightly in one hand, Rooney crossed the foyer and came out by the empty grillroom. He paused; unable to resist the temptation to steal a glance at the contents of his prize. But as he opened the emerald catch, there came an interruption. Some one glided into view from behind the stairway and the dip looked into the muzzle of a small, pearl-handled revolver.

"I beg your pardon," a coolly amused voice said; "but what you have there is mine! Hand it over!"

Rooney gasped. It was the girl of the bus and he saw that her eyes were burning with a queer light.

"Hand it over, I say!" she snapped. "I'm in no mood for trifling!"

He looked at the unwavering muzzle of the small but highly efficient weapon she carried. Then he handed her the bag without a word.

"Thank you," the girl murmured. "You did a neat piece of work, but you made one mistake. You were in too much of a hurry to make your get-away." She paused and a smile trembled on her lips. "Now while I've got you stuck up," she continued, "I might as well see what kind of a day *you've* had!"

Rooney glared into her face. "What — what do you mean?"

The smile still edged the vivid lips. "I mean lift up your hands higher while I go through you!"

She jammed the muzzle of her gun against his chest with a quick, decisive move. Rooney felt himself tremble. Any moment The Deacon might recover and appear on the scene. He had no desire to taste the crook's revenge.

With an expression of defeat, he raised his hands higher. The girl with a delicate, professional touch explored his pockets. His wallet she slipped into a slit prepared artfully in the lining of her jacket; then she plucked his scarfpin from his cravat.

She laughed quietly. "Not such a bad afternoon, after all," she observed. "The old duck I danced with is minus a watch and chain; and I've caught you for the roll and the sparkler! Not so bad. And the day isn't done yet!"

She turned away, her slender shoulders moving with silent mirth, and mounted the stairs, keeping the gun pointed over the balustrade. Rooney followed her with his eyes.

When she reached the top of the stairway, she blew him a kiss from her pink finger tips and disappeared.