The Queen of Thieves

As a seven-year-old, Shirley Pitts stole milk from doorsteps; in the Sixties she drank champagne with the Kray's. She died broke but the criminal world turned out for her funeral. In this extract from her life story, Gone Shopping, she reveals the tricks of her shoplifting trade

BY LORRAINE GÁMMAN

ON 25 MARCH 1982, twenty-one Dalmiers in regal procession followed Shirley Pitts to a South London cemetery. The woman the newspapers called the Queen of Shoplifters was finally laid to rest in a £35,000 Zambia Rhodes she didn’t buy over the counter.

Family and friends did their best to say goodbye privately, but it wasn’t easy. Photographers and reporters tramp on church and mausoleum roofs to get a better look and turned the funeral into an absolute farce in their attempts to locate the ‘criminal aristocracy’.

One reporter later commented that Shirley’s early life was ‘as much Dickens as Dickens & Jones’. Yet not all Shirley’s crimes stemmed from material deprivation or Dickensian conditions. Like her brothers and her father, Harry Pitts, who died in prison in 1962, Shirley grew up within the criminal subculture in London and soon came to see crime as a normal way of life. As well as shoplifting, an activity which she regarded as her bread and butter trade, Shirley went on to earn her living from fraud, bank robbery, the escort business and numerous other scams.

Does crime pay? Read Shirley’s story and make your own mind up...

To nick the first pint of milk was frightening. I was about seven or eight at the time and, looking back, it seems so funny that a pint of milk could be such a big deal. The milkman used to leave bread at some of the houses, so we started regularly stealing the bread and milk from different doorsteps each day. Adgie and me got much braver as time went on. We’d wait for the milkman to go into the flats at the bottom of the road and then we’d take the milk and bread. It was a bonus the days we managed to get his petty cash as well. On the way home we’d go into the grocery shop on the premises of buying things. But we’d always nick more than we bought. Adgie would cover me while I got a knobble of bacon or a big hump of cheese under my coat. These were all on rations and you had to have a ration book to get them.

I thought we were doing good getting the food, because when we got home Adgie would get a cuddle, and I think I thought I could make my mum love me too if I got things for her.

Even when my dad was out of prison, there was still never enough money to go round. I remember once, when my mum was taken into hospital and my dad was looking after us, we needed clothes. So my dad asked Alice Diamond to get us some. Alice Diamond was a ‘hostess’ and hung out with the gang of shoplifters from the Elephant called the Forty Thieves (after the story about Ali Baba and his gang, I suppose). She was the biggest woman you ever did see, with diamond rings on her fingers and fox furs around her neck. I thought she looked the business.

We went into Peachy’s, which used to have things hanging up all over the shop: handkerchiefs on pins, socks on pins, as well as men’s suits. I didn’t realise it then, but Alice had big shoplifting drawers on. As we walked around the shop, she kept asking me, ‘Will this fit your brother?’ and I said, ‘yes’. Then it would be, ‘Will this fit you or your sister?’ Every time I said ‘yes’, she put the things down her, and my eyes grew bigger.

I didn’t go out with Alice and her gang again until the Christmas of that year. These women were like film stars to me. They arrived for a drive in a Chrysler car and I thought I was going to Heaven, not out the window. They said I could ‘help’ them work. They said nobody would pay much attention to a little nippers like me. My job was to stroll into the shop with an empty bag that I might get it the same as the bag held by Alice or one of the others. When the bag was full, we’d quietly swap. I’d pass over the empty one and walk out with the full one. They paid me well for this day’s work. I liked the work and wasn’t frightened. It really was child’s play, and such a good technique.

Even 40 years later, I was still working this way. I’d go to really exclusive shops in Kensington like Louis Vuitton or Celine holding so extremely expensive leather holdall and load up with the best handbags or clothes I could get my hands on without being spotted. When the bag was full, one of my mates would come in and carry out the full holdall as they went, passing me an identical leather holdall to fill up.

Hating is just a matter of technique, like everything else. How do you do it? There are different techniques for the different shops. Harrods, Fortnum and Mason, Yves St Laurent, Channel. No, I’d never bother with Marks and Spencer and I’d never

continued on page 2

null