

The Queen of Thieves

As a seven-year-old, Shirley Pitts stole milk from doorsteps; in the Sixties she drank champagne with the Krays. 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 GAMMAN

My story about shoplifting begins with my mother, Nelly Taylor, from Lambeth Walk. My mum was a remarkable-looking girl, very beautiful, and my grandfather adored her. My grandmother, who I never knew, died when my mum was only 14, and subsequently my grandfather spoiled his 'little Nelly' rotten. According to Nelly's sisters, she knew this and knew how to play on it. She 'acted up'.

My dad was slightly built with striking eyes. Years later my mum said she thought my dad looked like the young Frank Sinatra. She never worried about what he did as long as he gave her money. This changed, though, during the war, when he started leaving my mum with us kids down the Tube while he went out at night.

The rest of the country might have been at war, but my dad certainly wasn't. He was a generous man and good to us kids, but the police were never very far from our door. One night in December, we were woken up by the police banging on the door. They really did shout 'Open the door in the name of the law!' - it seems so old fashioned now. No one did answer the door, so the police

smashed it in and told my dad he was 'nicked'.

Although he got bail, we all knew that my dad was going to prison when his case came up. The morning he was going to court, he woke me up and made me some toast. I think I was six years of age at the time. 'Listen, Shirl,' he said. 'I want you to be a really grown-up girl. It's very important you look after your mother. You do as she tells you, won't you?' I said, 'Yes, dad,' and he told me, 'Be a good girl and don't answer back.'

One morning, Nelly looked at me and my brother Adgie and said, 'There's no money in the house.' She was holding my little brother Billy in one arm and a silly love story in the other hand - she was only aware of the war and the outside world when the sirens went off. 'There's no milk,' she said. I just looked at her. I didn't get at first what she actually meant. She repeated that there was no milk. She said to me, 'Do you know what I'm saying? Go down the road and take some milk off the doorsteps. But don't let anyone see you.'

ON 25 MARCH 1992, twenty-one Daimlers 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 £5,000 Zandra Rhodes dress 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 trampled 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

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 tin as well. On the way home we'd go

into the grocery shop on the pretence of buying things. But we'd always nick more than we bought. Adgie would cover me while I got a knuckle of bacon or a big lump of cheese under my coat. These were all on ration 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.

After the war, between the ages of nine and 12, I was more in

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...

charge of my brothers and sisters than ever before. Adgie was my main partner. For example, if I went into a shop, I'd talk to the man politely and get him to go downstairs, maybe to get a candle, and then Adgie would take what we needed and run off with the goods.

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 'hoister' and hung out with this 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 Peacry'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 me in a Chrysler car and I thought I was going to Heaven, not out thieving. They said I could 'help' them work. They said nobody would pay much attention to a little nipper

like me. My job was to stroll into the shop with an empty bag that was exactly the same as the bag held by Alice or one of the others. When the bag was full, we'd quietly swop. 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 Luis Vuitton or Celine holding an 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.

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

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