

T W O
O L D
D E A R S

EDWARD EVANS



Chapter 1

In Custody

Dear reader

Allow me to introduce myself: I'm Clive White, an investigative reporter for the *Mail*. I've worked for the paper for years, too many I'm sure most of my colleagues would say, but what the hell! I enjoy my job and whatever the young ones think, I still sniff out a good story now and then, and my editor George Stevenson, with whom I have an excellent working relationship, seems satisfied, so no doubt I will be here for a few more years yet ...

One of the strangest and yet most amusing stories I have ever investigated was the case of the two sisters, Edith and Maud Trenchard. Two dear old ladies who had been arrested for suspected armed robbery. Over the years, there had been a series of unsolved robberies and burglaries, both in the UK and on the continent and, I believe in the USA where the perpetrators were disguised as old ladies, but perhaps this was too much of a coincidence. They looked so vulnerable, so incapable, so ... old. How on earth could they in any way be accused of carrying out any crime, let alone where a sawn-off shot gun was used in a modern bank with all the latest surveillance equipment and security systems in place.

There was no question about it – the sisters were well off

and not without money. In fact, they lived in some style, residing in a rambling old mansion situated in hundreds of acres of beautiful countryside in a village called Little Riddington, near London.

Certainly the house was big and old, and when I went to visit, I found it very well maintained and truly magnificent. Set in a late 1920's time warp, you can imagine the décor. The entrance hall faced a massive staircase which split into two galleries with many doors leading off, to who knows where. Enormous settees and chaises longue graced the rooms, subtly interspaced with Diva mirrors and displays of Ostrich and Bird of Paradise. Paintings hung on the pastel decorated walls, which offered an airy lightness to every room.

Each room offered a touch of opulent splendour and there were more paintings – magnificent works of art attributed to the likes of Monet, Manet, Titian, Van Gogh, and Joshua Reynolds to name but a few; all of which were admired for what they were and not what they were worth. Some rooms featured numerous pictures and models of racing yachts, dedicated to various races, in which they had participated, including the America's Cup.

Numerous rooms had an individual theme created by their father in the 1920s; a music room which held a Bechstein piano and many other instruments from guitars to violins, and to my astonishment, they were still used as both ladies were accomplished musicians. These ladies must have been popular in their day as they were featured in photographs with the great band leaders such as Roy Fox, Jack Payne, Henry Hall and musicians like Fats Waller, Sidney Bechet and even Satchmo Louis Armstrong. I really couldn't take it all in.

A huge corridor of indoor plants led the way to an amazing conservatory, also fully furnished in the style of the 1920s. This really took my breath away; but here we

had the real thing, almost a forest of beautiful tropical plants, inter-dispersed with statues that befitted the era.

Edith, who was a cool 91 years of age, appeared to be the strongest and most capable of the two – forthright and decisive, whilst Maud, a very young 89-year-old, came over as a simple, pleasant little character who wouldn't say 'boo to a goose'. She was the kind of person, always doing as she was told and was often scolded in front of people by Edith. She appeared to accept this as her lot. 'Yes, Edith. No, Edith.' You know the type.

Bif, the chauffeur/gardener, I eventually found out was Edith's son and Alice, the cook was her daughter; but in reality they all mucked in together. They simply gave the pretence that they were employees. It was a strange situation, and then of course, there was Maud's son, Stanley, who was the General Manager. He had an authoritative air about him and looked after the estate in effect, employing whoever and whatever was needed to keep the place going; he was also what would be considered a financial whiz kid, adding to the family fortune. But where were the fathers, the husbands? No one ever talked about them and there were no signs anywhere of a man ever being there. It was a mystery I was determined to solve.

I was tipped off by the local Chief Inspector Baldwin that the police had arrested a couple of elderly women suspected of armed robbery. Well, I ask you, who could resist that?

I arrived at the police station to be greeted by the Chief Inspector who took me straight into his office, closing the door behind him. He sat down behind his sumptuous desk, inviting me to sit opposite, before bursting into uncontrollable laughter.

‘Clive,’ he began, still trying not to laugh. ‘You are not going to believe this! Bacon, one of my constables, has arrested two old dears for armed robbery. They’re in the interview room now and I just can’t believe it. I’m sure they are in their bloody nineties. The one doesn’t know whether she is on this earth or fullers, and the other one pretends to be intelligent but hasn’t a clue where she is. Come and have a look at them.’

We walked into an area adjacent to the interview room to look at them through the two-way mirror, and I too couldn’t believe my eyes. They looked so angelic, totally unconcerned about what was happening, chatting about this and that and whether they would be home in time for tea. One of them, I later found out, was called Maud; she never stopped knitting and was without a care in the world.

‘I’ve asked them if they want a solicitor,’ Baldwin continued, ‘but Edith the taller one, replied, “Oh no, we already have our own. He’s been with the family for fifty years you know. Ah! Is that what you are trying to do, young man, take the work away from him? Well, it won’t work. We like Mr Higginbotham and anyway, we don’t know you, do we? That’s right, isn’t it, Maud?” To which, Maud replied: “Yes, Edith.”’

Baldwin continued: ‘I then asked for their solicitor’s address and what firm he worked for and she replied, “Ooh, he doesn’t work for a firm. He’s Mr Higginbotham.” And when I asked whether she had his phone number, she told me she didn’t have it with her but it was on the fridge door in the kitchen!’

Now we are getting somewhere, I thought to myself, and despatched PC Littlewood to get the number.

We returned to Baldwin’s office, leaving the two old ladies in their own little world, chatting about nothing and waited for the officer to return with the solicitor’s phone

number. It wasn't too long before we were disturbed by Constable Littlewood, a grey-haired old stager, who really should have been put out to grass years before.

'Sorry guv, but I couldn't find my way round, or anybody at home,' Littlewood said in an apologetic tone.

'Are you sure? There must be someone at home. These two couldn't look after our cat, let alone themselves.'

'You should see the place, guv! It's massive. I almost got lost.'

'Did you hear that, Clive? He tells me he almost got lost and couldn't find anyone at home,' Inspector Baldwin continued, getting angrier by the minute. 'He's a bloody policeman and he almost got lost.' He paused for effect. 'For God's sake. Can't you be trusted to do a simple job like that?'

'I'm sorry guv.'

'Oh, get out.'

A red-faced Littlewood departed, leaving Baldwin shaking his head in frustration and quite frankly, not knowing what to do with the old dears. He opened the office door and yelled, 'Bacon!'

'Guv,' Bacon called back.

'Come in here a minute.'

Seconds later, Constable Bacon walked through the door. He was a roly poly sort of man, a little rough round the edges, which gave the impression he was a jovial fellow and a bit soft, but far from it. He was a stickler for doing everything by the book. To him, everything was either black or white with no shades of grey.

'Have you seen them? Have you taken a hard look at them?' Baldwin asked, the moment Bacon walked in.

'Yes, guv.'

'Well, what do you think? Are they capable of pulling off a robbery in a bank?'

'Guv, I hear what you say, but they were positively

identified by Sharon Spencer, the bank clerk who was held up at gunpoint. She's convinced even thought they were disguised as two old ladies.'

'They *are* two old ladies, for God's sake!'

'How were they caught?' I asked the officer.

'They were shopping in Marks and Spencer's and Sharon bumped into them. She apologised and one of them replied, "That's all right, dear." Sharon said she recognised the woman's voice as well as the pearls she was wearing, which had a distinctive blue clasp in the middle. She quietly went outside looking for a policeman and found me. She convinced me, so I arrested them, and here they are.'

'You do realise that if you are wrong, a) you'll look a right prat, and b) I won't want you working here with all the publicity this will bring.'

'What had they got on them when they arrived?' I asked.

'The taller one was still wearing the pearls and had the usual things in her handbag, plus about £600. That alone made me suspicious and—'

'What about the other?' Baldwin interrupted.

'All she had, guv, was a bag of knitting.'

'Did you ask her where she got the pearls?'

'No, guv.'

'Have you checked where the notes came from?'

Bacon just shook his head.

'What the friggin' heck have you *done*? You arrest two old women who don't look capable of walking into the bank unaided, let alone robbing it at gun point!'

'I didn't lock 'em up.'

'Why not? You've done everything else in accordance with the book.'

'I didn't think they would run away.'

'What? Two armed and dangerous robbers, and you didn't think they would run away. How did they get to

town?’

‘I didn’t ask.’

‘Christ! You’re as bad as Littlewood. Give me what you’ve got. I’ll go and talk to them.’

As Baldwin held his hand out, Bacon stuttered, ‘I haven’t got anything.’

‘What? You’ve arrested them and you haven’t got anything? Are you friggin’ mad?’

‘Nothing they say makes any sense.’

‘Then why friggin’ arrest them? Go on, join bloody Littlewood and get some of the reports up to date.’

Baldwin went into the interview room and I went into the adjacent room to watch the next round. The two old biddies were still chatting as though nothing had happened.

‘Good afternoon, ladies. I’m Chief Inspector Baldwin and I’ve come to have a chat with you.’

‘Good afternoon, young man and what are we doing here?’ Edith replied. Maud carried on knitting.

‘I wish I knew. Our Constable Bacon believes you have robbed a bank and he’s brought you here to ask you a few questions,’ Baldwin replied. ‘Well, did you?’

‘Did we what?’

‘Rob the bank.’

‘Young man, when I want some money, Stanley makes sure I have some.’

‘Who’s Stanley?’

‘He’s our manager.’

Baldwin turned to the mirror, rolled his eyes and shrugged as if to say, ‘What the hell can we do with these two?’

‘Now, how did you get to town?’

‘We didn’t. Bif took us to Marks and Spencer’s.’

‘I see, and how did Bif take you to Marks and Spencer’s?’

‘In the car, of course.’

‘And where is Bif now?’

‘We don’t know, do we, Maud? Do we, Maud?’ Edith repeated, almost shouting to get Maud’s attention.

‘No dear,’ Maud replied. ‘But he will be back at four o’clock.’

‘Did you come in a taxi?’ Baldwin asked.

‘Are you stupid, young man? It’s Bif, our chauffeur and he is to meet us at four o’clock.’

Baldwin looked at his watch. It was already after four-thirty. ‘Look, I’m going to see whether I can get your solicitor’s phone number. I want to see if you have someone to look after you.’

‘Young man, we are perfectly capable of looking after ourselves and we have all the help we need, thank you.’

‘Come on, let me check your address. I just need to be sure. Is it 17 Watling Street, Little Riddington?’

‘Yes, that’s it. Now, young man, Maud will need to go home soon.’

‘Oh, by the way, where did you get those lovely pearls?’ Baldwin asked casually.

‘Oh these,’ Edith replied, touching her neck. ‘Maud bought them for me from Marks and Spencer’s a few minutes ago. She liked the colour of the centre clasp.’

Baldwin again turned to the mirror and sighed. Shortly afterwards, he came out, whereupon I immediately volunteered to go and get the address and phone number of their solicitor. I must be honest, I was feeling very concerned for their welfare. They were vulnerable and would have been easily bullied by someone other than Baldwin. He was very experienced and had a heart, but he was not always around.

I set off, arriving at Watling Street only to find the numbers ended at 15. I continued for about half a mile before turning back to the village to ask where Number 17 was. Naturally, the best place to enquire was the Little

Riddington Village Post Office.

‘Yes, it’s just over a mile down the road. You’ll see it. There are two stone gate posts and one has 17 on it. Good luck,’ the post mistress said, her lips pursed in a knowing manner.

‘Thanks.’

I turned the car round and made my way back along the road from whence I came until I arrived at the gate posts, where sure enough ‘Number 17’ was etched on one. I turned into the entrance and drove down the road. Three-quarters of a mile later, I pulled up at the front door. Littlewood was right. It was an enormous place, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. There, also parked in the drive was a 1932 Duisenberg Phaeton, which I knew was worth a small fortune, particularly in this condition. I walked towards the main door but was intercepted by a man who looked in his late fifties, early sixties, wearing a chauffeur’s uniform from the 1920s.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked politely.

‘Yes, I’m looking for anyone who may be able to help. My name is Clive White. I’m from the *Mail* and—’

He stopped me in mid sentence. ‘Go away. We don’t talk to the newspapers. Go away.’

‘I’m sorry. I am—’ I tried to explain the circumstances, but was immediately shouted down.

‘Go away! Go away.’ The raised voice attracted attention, and we were quickly joined by another man whom I deduced to be Stanley.

On a whim, I said, ‘Good afternoon. You must be Stanley?’

It took them both by surprise and immediately placated the situation.

‘Yes, I’m Stanley.’

‘Look, I am from the press, but ...’ I emphasised, ‘I am not on press business. I was at the police station investigating a crime when two ladies were brought in.

One of them was called Maud.'

'Oh God! Are they lost again? I wondered where they had got to. They know where to go, and someone would always ring for me to pick them up.'

'No, not at all. They are suspected of being involved in an armed robbery at the National West Bank a few months ago.'

Stanley laughed, but when I look back, it seemed a forced laugh, which made me a little uncomfortable, even suspicious. The other man just looked on nervously.

'I'm Clive, incidentally,' I said, holding my hand out. 'And you must be ... er ... Bif?' At last he smiled and his nervousness disappeared as he took my hand and confirmed my thoughts.

'They *are* in trouble, but I don't think there is anything to worry about. The police would like to interview them with their solicitor and they don't know his number. They told me it was on the fridge.'

'That's Mr Higginbotham. Don't worry I've got his number,' Stanley said, leaving me in Bif's tender care. Naturally, we talked about the Duisenberg.

'They have had it since new in 1932.'

'I thought it was new,' I said, smiling. Those few words really endeared me to him as he began to open up a little more.

'I love my cars,' he said, directing me to follow him. However, we were stopped short as Stanley came out and shouted at Bif:

'Mr White has better things to do than waste time talking about cars to you. Go on, get on with your work. I'll see to him.'

You know, a reporter is always suspicious of situations like that and no one more than me. Had he got something to hide or was it that he was unsure of strangers, anyway? He gave me the number and I returned to my car, having a

last look at the Duisenberg and giving the thumbs up to Bif. I left the house, armed with Higginbotham's phone number, leaving a very worried-looking Stanley behind. I retraced my steps back to the road, only this time, I made a mental note of all I saw.

The moment I was able to, I phoned Higginbotham, introduced myself and appraised him of the situation, letting him know I was somewhat worried and asked if he could get to the police station as soon as possible because the two sisters were becoming very confused. I told him I would meet him there.

He sounded like some Dickensian clerk, very precise in everything he said and very correct in the way he spoke to me; in fact he sounded as though he was from that age and also caught in a time warp. I was genuinely looking forward to meeting the man.

'How have they been?' I asked Baldwin the moment I arrived.

'No change.'

'I've contacted their solicitor and he will be with you shortly.'

Shortly, was however immediately, as Rachael Temor, a police civil worker brought Mr Higginbotham through to the Chief Inspector's office. I could not believe my eyes; his clothes were also from a bygone era. He wore an old-fashioned dark three-piece suit, with the inevitable gold hunter watch and chain across his waistcoat pocket, winged shirt collar and old school tie. His ubiquitous black patent leather shoes were so highly polished, you could almost see your reflection in them. His swept-back hair added the finishing touch.

'James Higginbotham,' he said, announcing himself to the inspector with his hand outstretched.

'Chief Inspector Baldwin,' the inspector replied.

'Now what's all this about?' Higginbotham asked.