



SPLIT PERSONALITIES
British financier Sir Evelyn de Rothschild, pictured in 1968, was married to Jeanette, left, until 1971. Right, a helicopter carrying Jeanette's second husband, Stephen May, searching for his missing wife



Victim of a kidnap for ransom? A link to a ring of jewel thieves? As Italian police sensationally reopen an investigation after 44 years...

What WAS behind the snowy death of the Vogue model who married Evelyn de Rothschild?



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IN COLD BLOOD

WAS IT HYPOTHERMIA THAT KILLED EVELYN DE ROTHSCHILD'S EX-WIFE, JEANETTE? OR WAS SHE MURDERED, PERHAPS BECAUSE OF THAT MARRIAGE? THE MYSTERY HAS GRIPPED SOCIETY FOR 45 YEARS. NOW, A NEW INQUIRY PURSUES THE TRUTH

BY JOSEPHINE MCKENNA



Jeanette, pictured in 1970, became a fixture on the London social scene during her marriage to Evelyn



Evelyn de Rothschild, pictured in 1963, was considered one of the country's most eligible bachelors



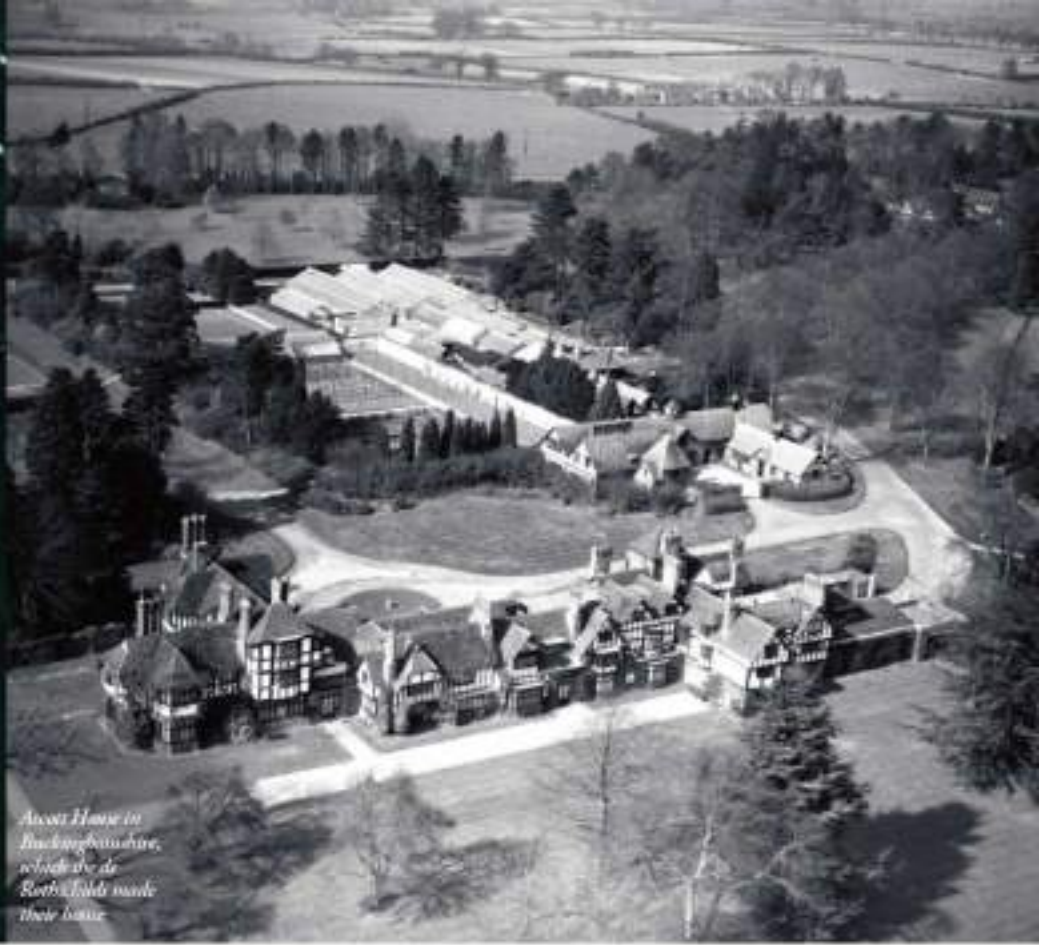
Sir Evelyn de Rothschild with Princess Anne, 2003



Sir Evelyn and his third wife, Lady de Rothschild, at Satchel's in New York, 2017



Jeanette dancing with Earl Mountbatten at a London film premiere party



Ascott House in Buckinghamshire, which the de Rothschilds made their home

General Carlo Felice Corsetti is sitting on the edge of a cream-coloured sofa in his Rome apartment, sifting through magazines and news articles that recall one of society's – and Italy's – most notorious cold cases.

The parched, shrill headlines chronicle the mystery of a case that has consumed him for decades: exactly what happened to Jeanette May, the ravishing 40-year-old former wife of billionaire financier Sir Evelyn de Rothschild, whose body was found with that of her secretary, Gabriella Guerin, more than a year after they drove into a snowstorm in the Sibillini Mountains in Italy's Marche region on 29 November 1980? Was it hypothermia and simple misadventure that killed them? Or were they murdered, perhaps because of the Rothschild name May still used on her passport?

The now 77-year-old Corsetti was a lead police investigator on the case. 'We tried everything,' he says, 'to find a solution.' The silver-haired carabinieri crisscrossed the world without success, exploring multiple leads and conspiracy theories linking the women's deaths to a major Christie's robbery, a Brazilian gem dealer, a Vatican banker found hanging from London's Blackfriars Bridge and to Sardinian kidnappers closer to home. This was not the wildest of fantasies, for such kidnappings were rife in Italy at the time. A Sardinian-led gang abducted a businessman nearby three years before the disappearance; famously, John Paul Getty III was kidnapped in 1973, and playboy jeweller Gianni Bulgari in 1975. Most provocatively, a British-German businessman called Rolf Schild had been kidnapped with his family in 1979 and ransomed for £220,000 – largely, it was then believed, because the bandits mistook his name for Rothschild.

There were other baffling aspects to the case: a missed appointment; sightings of the women with an unidentified stranger; the

mystery of why, and when, they had abandoned their car. 'Why did the car stop there?' asks Corsetti, punctuating his question with his hands. 'It was functioning normally, it was not blocked by the snow, because there was no snow under the wheels. So why? If they could not proceed, they could have gone back.' He marshals his thoughts: 'I am not convinced it was a double murder. But there are several unclear investigative elements that do not fit the theory their deaths were caused by the cold. That is the mystery.'

Such a mystery that an open verdict was recorded by a judge in 1989, with a presumption of murder. But last November, Italian authorities launched a fresh inquiry. Fourteen elderly witnesses were interrogated by police and prosecutors in a bid to get to the bottom of what happened. The witnesses appeared to have been blindsided by the new investigation and uneasy with the enduring suspicions of the media and the authorities.

'We are working in the hope of getting a result,' the regional chief prosecutor, Giovanni Fabrizio Narbone, told me. There were, he noted, discrepancies in previous interviews and time was running out. 'We thought this might be the last chance to try and get to the truth.' The provincial police commander, Colonel Raffaele Ruocco, was emphatic: 'Forty years ago, it was a different world, there are now other elements to consider. This is an investigation into murder.'

Italy's eastern Marche region is known for its rugged mountains, hilltop towns and pristine beaches that sweep along the Adriatic coast. Despite its natural beauty, the locals have a reputation for keeping to themselves and the region has never attracted the attention British expatriates have showered on Tuscany or Umbria. It's certainly a world away from the vibrant London social scene once ornamented by Jeanette and Evelyn de Rothschild.

Born in January 1940, Jeanette came from humble origins; she was raised by her single mother, Susan, after her father, a flight

sergeant, was killed while defusing a bomb on the Isle of Sheppey. But she attracted attention at an early age. 'Even as a young girl, she was willowy and beautiful,' a resident told the local newspaper.

As a teenager, Jeanette was a talented dancer and offered a place at Sadler's Wells, but decided classical ballet was not for her. After briefly dancing in the West End, she began modelling for *Vogue*, making commercials and appearing as a hostess on the popular *Spot the Tune* game show. Her mother always knew she would go far. 'I thought that maybe she would turn out to be another Mary Pickford and go into films,' a grief-stricken Susan Bishop told the *Daily Express* in 1982. 'She succeeded in everything she did – dancing, modelling, TV commercials. But I used to tease her and say, "You'll probably end up marrying the dustman."'

Far from it. Jeanette embraced the Swinging Sixties in London, sharing a flat with women her age and having a string of boyfriends; she was keen, her mother said, on an Italian admirer. Instead, she caught the eye of Evelyn de Rothschild, a polo-player from the legendary banking dynasty who previously told a reporter he was looking for a partner who was 'amusing and intelligent'.

Although his family's empire was steeped in history, financing the Suez Canal, the London Underground and Wellington's armies at Waterloo, de Rothschild (who was knighted in 1989) was at the time something of a playboy, socialising with European aristocrats, breeding thoroughbreds and collecting classic cars, including a 1939 Bentley Cabriolet. He was, of course, a major catch. But at the age of 35, he sidestepped other eligible women in his circle and wed Jeanette, who was nearly a decade younger, in a private ceremony in Washington DC in 1966.

Was his family thrilled? His mother, Yvonne, gave an interview to the *Daily Express* in which she said she 'worried he might marry the wrong sort of girl' and was relieved he'd chosen someone 'lovely and charming'. But neither she nor Jeanette's mother was invited

to attend the wedding. Obtaining visas would have been such a problem, Yvonne said. Enthusiasm does not leap off the page.

The newlyweds made their home on the de Rothschild family's 4,000-acre Buckinghamshire estate, Ascott House – the listed property dates back to the reign of James I and boasts an enviable collection of Dutch masters. Evelyn took Jeanette to South Africa, brought her opals from Australia and gave her the family's emeralds. Life was glamorous: the year after the wedding, Jeanette was snapped by society photographer Patrick Lichfield with Princess Alexandra, Angus Ogilvy and Hollywood stars Mia Farrow and James Mason at a party at Claridge's. The revellers were asked to leave at 4.30am when residents complained about the noise.

'Jeanette took to the life like a duck to water and people took to her in return, though she was a bit shy,' said Susan Bishop. 'I remember her telling me she'd sat next to the Queen at the races.'

Nicky Haslam recalls meeting Jeanette and Evelyn at a dinner hosted by the Earl and Countess of Dudley. The interior designer described her as 'very pretty, blonde and fun' but had reservations: 'I do remember thinking she was not particularly outstanding in any way and a surprising wife for Evelyn, who was so essentially European and larger than life in every way.'

There were no children, and the marriage collapsed in 1971 – without bitterness. (Later, when Jeanette disappeared, her mother received kind letters from the de Rothschild family.) An amicable, but not extravagant, settlement was agreed upon and Jeanette established herself as an interior designer, developing a keen interest in the world of art and antiques. Six years later, Jeanette wed Stephen May, a personnel director for John Lewis; but the de Rothschild name remained on her passport and she continued to mix with the well-connected elite: Gianni Bulgari and his then wife Nicole, the Italian industrialist Eugenio Cefis and the Italo-philic British author Raymond Flower were considered friends. >



Stephen May searching for his wife in Sarnano – he eventually offered a reward of £150,000



General Corsetti, who was a lead police investigator on the case



The house in Marche that Stephen and Jeanette were renovating



Jeanette's death
quiet: Murder
not ruled out

Riddle as bodies
of women are
found at lake



How did
Jeanette
May die?

◀ Jeanette and her second husband shared a love of Italy and bought a farmhouse in Schito, just outside the medieval town of Sarnano. Nazzareno Venanzi, a local surveyor, was hired to help her with her renovations and Guerin, a widow with two young children, assisted her with Italian translation. Leaning across his cluttered desk in the family firm above the town's main square, the well-preserved Venanzi – he's 86 – recalls their first encounter. 'She was attractive, likeable. I didn't know her true identity until she disappeared.' Venanzi was one of the last people to see Jeanette and her companion alive; they shared an aperitivo with him and his wife at their home just before lunch. 'She asked me if I could go to the mountains with her,' Venanzi told me in his Sarnano office. 'I told her I couldn't because I had too many deadlines.'

What happened after that is disputed. What's clear is that Jeanette missed a scheduled appointment with the previous owner of her property in the early afternoon. Instead, she and Guerin took the winding road out of town leading to the mountains as the storm gathered. The environment is forbidding: as I followed their route on a grey November day, I became completely disoriented as a blanket of thick fog settled in front of my car.

Ortelio Valori served the women refreshments at his family hotel, the Sibilla Parco near Sassotetto, some 13 or so kilometres away, around 4.30pm. It was already getting dark. 'I saw a car outside, a man waiting for them in a car,' the 82-year-old told me by telephone. Other sightings of this mystery man were reported – and discounted.

After which... well, therein lies the mystery. When police found their Peugeot 4,000 feet up the mountain three weeks after their disappearance, the car showed no sign of any breakdown or forced entry. A scarf and other personal belongings had been left inside; they had not dressed for a blizzard. Police believe that as weather worsened, the women sought refuge in an abandoned farmhouse nearby – burnt firewood and dirty plates were found there. But Corsetti says they had plenty of time to turn their car around and avoid what would become the worst snowstorm in 35 years.

When the women were reported missing, a massive search was launched involving 500 police supported by helicopters and dog squads. They scoured the rugged mountain range for months as police continued their inquiries.

Investigators wondered if the women were lured to the farmhouse before being killed. Jeanette's former business partner, Rose Underdown, openly speculated that her friend might have been seized for displaying her wealth. 'In a country where kidnapping is an industry, one does not go into a village, buy a cottage and then start to spend money doing it up,' she told the *Daily Express*.

But police never received a note or a ransom demand; nor did Stephen May, and nor did Evelyn de Rothschild. Corsetti said inquiries into Sardinian kidnappers led nowhere.

That didn't stop a flood of theories. Days after the women's disappearance, investigators began looking into whether Jeanette had any links with murky elements of the art world. A telegram sent to her Sarnano hotel days after her disappearance contained a Rome

address linked to a major jewellery and art robbery at Christie's in Piazza Navona, and a second telegram sent to the auction house claimed the stolen goods were at the same address. Police decided both were hoaxes. 'None of those leads resulted in any solution, but we checked everything,' Corsetti said.

Scotland Yard raised questions about Jeanette's connection to an antique dealer, Sergio Vaccari, who was stabbed to death in Holland Park in September 1982. Corsetti flew to London after police found a photo of an antique clock inside Vaccari's personal safe, suggesting a potential link to the Christie's robbery. To further muddy the waters, Vaccari reportedly had connections to Roberto Calvi, the Vatican banker murdered in London the same year.

But Corsetti found nothing to prove that Jeanette had any knowledge of the Christie's robbery or had ever met Vaccari. 'We tried to understand if there was a link, but there was no evidence,' Corsetti said. The leads kept coming: 'At a certain point, our inquiries concentrated on a Brazilian gemologist, Jose Rodriguez May,' he told me. 'He looked like the man who was seen speaking animatedly to Mrs May on the afternoon of her disappearance.'

The Brazilian was arrested in Rome but was later released and fully cleared when the Sarnano hotel owner did not recognise him as the man he'd seen. 'Everything ended there,' Corsetti said.

It would be 14 months before hunters discovered the women's skeletal remains on the edge of a steeply sloping wood near Lake Fiastra in January 1982, 10 miles from where they had left their vehicle. Just two weeks earlier, Jeanette's second husband, Stephen, had offered a £150,000 reward for any news – but then became embroiled in a dispute

with the hunters when he offered them a portion of it.

'It was really shocking,' said 83-year old Corrado Ermini, one of the hunters who found the bodies, which had been ravaged by wolves and wild boars. 'I saw the bodies laid out on the grass, they had been there a long time,' he told me in his home beside the lake. Jeanette wore a Cartier bracelet her husband had given her, and identity papers were found with the bodies, which were no longer recognisable. 'I found a detached foot with the remains of a tibia bone inside,' Ermini added. 'Who knows what happened to them?'

Guerin's daughter, Gioia, only two years old when her mother disappeared, has no doubt: 'I think it's a double homicide,' she told the regional newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino*. 'Mum had two small children, I don't think she would have been going for a [mountain] climb when it was already dark at 5pm.'

Many of the 3,000 inhabitants of Sarnano agree. They cannot believe the women simply succumbed to the storm. And they cannot believe that the glamour attached to the name of a vastly rich family did not play a part. As Floriana Giacomini, who works at Le Clarisse restaurant and was in her twenties when the women disappeared, says: 'In my opinion, they were followed by someone from their world. They were unaware of what awaited them.'

Unaware, much mourned – and still a mystery. A mystery that more than merits the new inquiry Prosecutor Narbone and Colonel Ruocco have been spearheading. □

Locals cannot believe that the women succumbed to the storm, nor that the name of a vastly rich family did not play a part

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