

Blundering out from Sarah's shadow and into a midlife crisis

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Body

AFTER fourteen years spent in the voluminous shadow of Fergie, Prince Andrew is at last showing some overdue independence. To many, it looks less like a man taking the shears to an ex-wife's apron strings and more like one in the throes of a midlife crisis.

Suddenly it is back to the Randy Andy of old. Gone is the dour, dull and overweight Andrew whose social horizon never extended much beyond playing golf or sitting at home watching videos. In his place we are treated to the sight of a playboy Prince lounging on a yacht off the coast of Thailand surrounded by topless nubile.

The constraints and decorums of the past few years have been cast to a sultry tropical breeze. And so, more worryingly, has the down-to-earth respectability to which his mother attaches so much importance.

'Why shouldn't he have fun?' one of his closest friends asks. 'He behaved impeccably over the Fergie situation, but lost his confidence. Now he is getting on with his life.' Since the Yorks' separation in March 1992, the Prince has been linked with a number of beautiful women.

In 1992 Pretty Polly model Catrina Skepper was a guest at Sunninghill. Two years later he was seen with Lord Braybrooke's daughter, Cazzy Neville.

Others he has dated include golfer Sally Prosser, TV researcher Henriette Peace, PR girl Aurelia Cecil and most notably South African-born Heather Mann.

But all were forced to run the gauntlet of Fergie's scrutiny, and one by one they dropped out of the race. As one of the girls said: 'It's all very well being romanced by a Prince but not when you're staring at a photograph of his ex-wife.' Andrew appeared to be playing along with Fergie's game. Only last April he declared: 'I don't rule remarriage out.' In fact, by then all the signs indicated that he had finally decided to make his break for freedom.

The late publisher Robert Maxwell's daughter, Ghislaine, had a lot to do with that. The two started seeing a lot of each other.

A great deal more sophisticated than the Prince, she introduced him to a raunchy international lifestyle.

Suddenly he started falling out of Soho's China White nightclub at 2.30am with another PR girl, Caroline Stanbury, and turning up with Ghislaine at an unbecoming 'hookers and pimps' Halloween party in New York.

On a visit to Los Angeles he pitched up at another party where a number of the guests were known drug users.

Andrew appears attracted to the wealthy and powerful, particularly in the United States. He is very friendly with Jeffrey Epstein, 47, intensely private financier and sometime partner of Ghislaine.

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She has hosted dinner parties for the Prince at Epstein's Upper East Side apartment in New York.

Donald Trump, the billionaire property developer, is a friend of both the Yorks. So is Lawrence Stroll, owner of royal jeweller Asprey and Garrard and the billionaire founder of the Tommy Hilfiger designer label.

SEVERAL American beauties have been linked to the Prince. Former Miss USA Julie Hayek was said to have 'hit it off immediately' with him when they dined together six months ago. Hayek, 39, who nearly married Prince Albert of Monaco, shared a romantic dinner with Andrew at New York's Le Cirque restaurant.

There was Alexandra Styron, the American daughter of the multimillionaire Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Styron, who wrote *Sophie's Choice*. She was arranged as a replacement date for the prince after supermodel Christy Turlington effectively stood him up in October 1999.

The 30-ish Alexandra, former boss of a theatre company and now an author herself, sat alongside Andrew at a dinner on Sir Evelyn Rothschild's estate in Martha's Vineyard, then moved on to a nightclub where they were spotted smooching. She later let it be known the evening did not end without a kiss.

Melissa Lincoln, 41, has proved one of the most contentious of Prince Andrew's dates at least in the eyes of her jealous husband.

After meeting her on a plane, the Duke telephoned her five times at her hotel in Hawaii before she invited him to join her for dinner at her GBP 3,500-a-night oceanfront bungalow. The rendezvous was secretly filmed by a private detective hired by her entrepreneur husband, James, raising the prospect never fulfilled of the Duke being called as a court witness in a bitter divorce battle.

To the Prince's way of thinking, he is merely having a good time.

There is a worrying undercurrent to this behaviour, however, which harks back to the excesses of previous royal generations.

His great-great-grandfather, King Edward VII, was a bon viveur of international repute. But that was a century ago and the world has moved on.

No longer is the royal family able to pursue such a hedonistic lifestyle unchecked by public opinion.

At the same age, Andrew's great-uncle, the future Duke of Windsor, decided that he was entitled to live his life as he saw fit in the company of whomever he chose and that cost him his throne.

Little has changed in the intervening 60 years if anything, public opinion has hardened towards the Royal Family. Everything they do is analysed and scrutinised and their behaviour is no longer excused by deference.

PRINCE Andrew is perfectly aware of that. As he himself once pointed out, what he does in private is his business, 'but if I am in a public place I am fair game'.

His behaviour over the last few months has been all too public.

Louche parties in New York. Mixing with people who would never be allowed to set foot in the Queen's drawing room. And now disporting himself on a yacht with a bevy of topless girls.

He remains what he always was 'a poppet, but a dull poppet,' as Fergie once described him. But his antics of late have revealed another side of his character.

'The thing you have to remember about Andrew,' says a friend, 'is that as well as being royal, he is also rather naive.'

Classification

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