

Good chablis and ‘halfies’: life with the other Duchess of Argyll

For the majority of 1991 I was utilized as secretary to the Dowager Duchess of Argyll, the 4th and last other half of Ian Campbell, the 11th duke. Mathilda was the partner after the more well-known Margaret, the topic of *A Very British Scandal*, Sarah Phelps’s dazzling and honestly terrible BBC three-part drama. Whenever I discuss Mathilda I typically need to clarify: “Not that duchess, the next one.”

Margaret constantly cast a shadow, or as she composes briefly and drily in her autobiography *Forget Not*, released in 1975: “Three weeks after our divorce ended up being last Ian Argyll wed once again, for the 4th time, to a Mrs Matilda Heller. She had actually remained in Ian’s life for some years prior to our divorce.”

Presumably the misspelling of Mathilda’s name was purposeful. By 1991 the Duke’s very first kid from his 2nd marital relationship had actually acquired the title and the castle, and neither of the later better halves were routine visitors. The 2 ladies did, nevertheless, periodically speak on the phone.

” Desperately unfortunate,” Mathilda would state, carefully changing the receiver. “Poor lady, believes she’s on an ocean liner.”

” Where is she?”

” Claridge’s.”

I had this task due to the fact that in the days prior to keypads anybody might stroll into anywhere. Aged 27, on my routine path to a mentor position that wasn’t truly me, I utilized to cycle past the Oxford University professions structure. One day I stopped and roamed in, and quickly succumbed to a box-file significant Miscellaneous. That afternoon I used to tutor Paul McCartney’s kid, and for something espionage in west Africa, however a couple of months later on wound up on the west coast of Scotland in a mini castle at the end of a rutted track.

Mathilda leased the leading 2 floorings of Lunga House, a castellated and turreted 16th century manor owned by the regional laird. She balanced out the heavy Scottish stonework with intense interiors and hand-painted chinoiserie wallpaper, while from her bed room (in a real tower) she had a view over the Atlantic to Jura.

By this time Mathilda was 65 years of ages, and “well-known for serving the very best food in Scotland”. Her face had actually softened with butter and cream, though her blue eyes honed when

she acted out her policy of halfies. At meals, if she completed her plate initially she might state “halfies”, and take half of whatever was left on my plate.

As for what she was actually like, in those pre-internet days I understood generally what she selected to inform me. In her own evaluation, Mathilda was whatever Margaret was not. Her 10 years at Inveraray Castle had actually enjoyed, without scandal, and she was pleased to show the duke’s picture on her numerous periodic tables. To her, Ian Campbell was not the dark soul of his track record. She was his 4th partner, yes, however likewise the dowager duchess. Like Catherine Parr, Mathilda was the survivor, faithful to the brand-new duke (like the old duke) though she wanted he ‘d welcome her more frequently to supper.

So I understood all that, and after that the chatter. Margaret, by the 1990 s, was a composite of chatter– sexual images, created letters, headless naked Hollywood stars– and Mathilda could not stand totally aloof. Explained in the BBC drama as “an American heiress”, I heard whispers that she too was a victim bride-to-be. “Pay the expenses,” as Paul Bettany’s duke spits at Claire Foy’s Margaret in *A Very British Scandal*, “it’s what you’re for”.



Claire Foy as Margaret, Ian Campbell's 3rd other half, whose racy life is the topic of a BBC three-part series, *A Very British Scandal*. Photograph: TBC/BBC/Blueprint

Except it wasn't rather that easy. Mathilda had actually matured in France with her grandparents, was formerly wed to an Austrian intellectual and had a cut-glass British accent to contribute to her 3 other languages. She 'd studied at Radcliffe in Cambridge, Massachusetts, however she wasn't fresh off the boat. Maybe she 'd evaded the worst of her partner, and her benefit was a satisfied dowager retirement in a scaled down variation of her previous marital house.

Partly, my task was to keep this impression undamaged. I was paid 70 guineas a week, which suggested ?77 "all discovered", consisting of a home in the neighboring town of Craobh Haven and a limitless account in the store.

The initial task description was unclear, however above all I came for the ghostwriting. Mathilda had an agreement with the publisher John Murray for a narrative, and for one basic factor: everybody had an interest in Margaret. Ruby Wax expected a television interview, and there was talk of *Wogan*. Thirty years on, a three-part drama can still be pitched to the BBC, due to the fact that pictures of a duchess dressed just in her pearls will do that. Mathilda was the other female; she had an angle.

Her book, nevertheless, would never ever be completed. Mathilda didn't wish to blog about *Argyll vs Argyll*, other than perhaps for her success at getting away journalism, she and the duke bold the hills of Provence in a racy convertible Sunbeam. She chose to harp on her sunlit pre-war life as a kid, and her evacuation to the States on a ship with a full-sized on-deck carousel. She was constantly open up to remembering her married life at Inveraray Castle. The balls, the pomp, the large excitement of a duchess castle with the expensive duchess trimmings.

Every early morning, I saw her complex breakfast increase the stairs to her bed room, and after that took dictation at her bedside. I composed letters. We dealt with the narrative, normally the Inveraray area. We agonised over menus, dabbled itinerary and utilized a brand-new cook after Mathilda interacted her hatred of garnish by tossing anything ornamental and green on to the flooring. Consistently.

Then we 'd evacuate and head for Paris, and Mathilda's flat in the Rue de Tournon. The splendid main space included her bed and a bath and a swing hanging from the rafters, however our imperishable everyday regimen consisted of lunch with white wine and at 6 sharp some iced Wyborowa and video games of backgammon prior to supper. I was frequently pleasantly intoxicated. We were almost constantly smoking cigarettes.

Mathilda liked to inform me she was my finishing school, and it's real I discovered how to open oysters. And to drive her Ford Mustang throughout the Place de la Concorde at heavy traffic, and the right pronunciation of Inveraray as "Inverarer". She presented me to the excellent brasseries of Paris, *Vagenende*(my favourite) and *Le Procope* and likewise the old Nazi favourite *La Coupole*. In some cases I waited up late, so that when she got back from some celebration I might unhook the back of

her gown, and proceed on the zip.

” Thank God,” she ‘d state, “it’s a lot simpler when there’s 2 of one.”

But nevertheless tough we pretended, and whatever the heiress circumstance when she wed, the duchess had cash concerns. The great Chablis was running low in the cellar, and the dealership from Christie’s who remained for lunch entrusted to a rolled-up carpet below his arm. In Scotland, the oysters we consumed were declines from the regional bay at Craobh Haven, too huge to be offered to the trade. Poor us. I was sent out to Paris on my motorcycle to offer a very first edition *Ulysses*

A secretary was an extravagance, however I wasn’t truly that and nor was I a ghostwriter. My function was mainly to be present, specifically at meal times, like a “lady-help” from the 19 th century. I was the paid buddy. Naturally I evaluated her. In the early 60 s Margaret had the tabloids to question her stability. In 1991 Mathilda had me, exhibiting displeasure as evidence I wasn’t totally servile. With little else to make up for the power imbalance (70 guineas a week), I snapped at Mathilda for what I disliked in myself. She was lonesome, and losing her benefits in life. She was banal. She wished to be an author however could not swing into action.

I felt I should have a viewpoint, and chose the upper class was dreadful. Mathilda was awful, however– the lackey’s misconception here– without me whatever would have been even worse. I wasn’t misguided, *she* was misguided. I declined to be grateful, in the method anticipated of me. I was really disrespectful to Ruby Wax’s individuals.

And then one early morning in September, Mathilda awakened and forgot who she was. The baffled physician recommended aspirin and rest, and Mathilda sat patiently in her four-poster bed, the white lace drapes drawn back. I brought up a chair. Her long, hennaed hair was topped the pillows and she crossed her hands above the brightness of the duvet. She waited, completely serenely, for me to revitalize her memory, to summarise her life.

It was really unfortunate, a lot of it. She ‘d lost 2 kids, a kid from her very first marital relationship and with the duke a child who lived just a few days. Her own dad was a rich homosexual seduced in the 20 s by her mom for a bet. Rather potentially a bet made by the duke himself, Mathilda’s future other half, who at 23 years her senior had actually when been a good friend of her mom’s. A friend. Margaret had no monopoly on upsetting and salacious stories.

” You own a five-litre convertible Mustang,” I stated, entering gently. “It plays the *Star-Spangled Banner* when put in reverse.”

I liked to make her smile. I informed her about her easy-going relationships with the artist Brion Gysin and the author Pierre Boulez. In Edinburgh, she lunched with the professional photographer Brodrick Haldane, and in Paris with the carver Joseph Erhardy.

"Nudes or motorcycles," I advised her. "He was excellent enjoyable, however informed us topic was an issue."

She sent out a regular monthly cheque to the aging poet Peter Russell. Yes, I stated, obviously we had actually continue to do that. Warming to my job, I advised her of her uncommon skill for liking any person who had anything likeable about them, which was basically everyone. Including me. Her homes were similarly available to judgmental non-writing authors and founded guilty drug smugglers, and to Steven Berkoff.

"You are the Dowager Duchess of Argyll." This was not something anybody else might state, and specifically not Margaret. "You endured your partner the duke, after 10 pleased years at Inveraray Castle." For confirmation, she might check out the pages of her narrative. Her life had actually been an exceptional experience, and was absolutely worth keeping in mind.

Mathilda did recuperate, approximately a point. After I quit working for her we ended up being pals, and the last time I saw her we had supper at the Hotel Continental in Lausanne. We shared caring memories, and talked up the swimming pool home in Vézelay where she imagined ending her days. A year later on, in 1997 not long prior to her 72 nd birthday, I was amazed by her name in the documents.

The funeral service was kept in Vézelay, and 3 of her previous secretaries participated in, one from prior to my time and one after. In spite of Margaret's shadow we concerned pay our aspects. To Mathilda, not the well-known Duchess of Argyll however the next one. The one we understood and enjoyed.

Source: [Good chablis and 'halfies': life with the other Duchess of Argyll](#)