**Big Story: Jonathan Aitken - The simple sword of redemption**

**Jonathan Aitken and his pop starlet daughter talk to Barry Egan about how the family managed to stay together despite the former Tory minister's public fall from grace, his divorce and time in jail, where he earned £5 a week as a toilet cleaner**

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New man: Jonathan Aitken

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**'How well did anyone know her?" Jonathan Aitken writes at one point in his new book on Margaret Thatcher. It is a question you might just as well ask of the author.**

The great-nephew of Lord Beaverbrook, he was born in Dublin on August 30, 1942. A New York-born fella by the name of Éamon de Valera attended the christening at St Patrick's Cathedral – then-Taoiseach Dev knew the child's grandfather Lord Rugby, the first British representative to the newly independent Irish state. Jonathan's godmother, Princess Juliana, later to become Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, was also present at the grand baptism on October 16.

It was a more than auspicious start in the world for Jonathan although he was to suffer humiliating ignominy and public downfall.

He must tire of reading of himself as the disgraced ex-Tory minister who went to jail – and found God – in 1999 for perjury and perverting the course of justice (he received an 18-month prison sentence, of which he served seven months.) Yet it will inevitably be the first line in his obituary.

High-born Old Etonians who read law at Oxford are not supposed to end up doing porridge in high-security Belmarsh as Prisoner 73.

Infamously, in April 1995, Aitken held a press conference to start his libel action against The Guardian and Granada television with the bon mots: "I will cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism with the simple sword of truth" – only to be "impaled upon his own sword", as Margaret Hebblethwaite wrote at the time. The Guardian's lawyers uncovered that the then minister for defence procurement had his hotel bill paid in the Ritz in September 1993 by a Saudi associate, in contravention of ministerial rules, and not by his wife, Lolicia, as he had testified in court.

In an address to the CS Lewis Foundation and the Prison Fellowship Ministry, in August 1998, he said: "I was getting quite frequently tipped as a possible future leader of my party and as a successor to John Major.

"The political graveyards are littered with the long-forgotten corpses of ex-future prime ministers, so any such label should have made a wise man humble. In fact, it did quite the reverse. The combination of what Shakespeare in Hamlet calls 'the insolence of office' and in Macbeth 'vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself', gave me a surfeit of hubris. Pride is the deadliest of sins, but I was bursting with pride."

And then: "It was a lie about who paid a $1,500-hotel bill of mine in the Ritz Hotel in Paris while I had been a government minister. I told this lie. I told it on oath in my evidence in court. To my eternal shame, I even got my wife and daughter to back me up with witness statements supporting my lie."

The night I met Jonathan in Dublin for a couple of glasses of wine he is with the daughter he was referring to all those years ago. He dotes on her; and she is full of obvious love for him in return. Victoria is a grown up woman now. It was she who contacted me to suggest that I might interview her father about his critically acclaimed tome on Thatcher while he was in Dublin.

(In Margaret Thatcher: Power And Personality he writes entertainingly of how the subject of the book could have become his mother-in-law, as he dated Carol Thatcher for three years and risked his career when he ended the relationship.)

I agreed on the condition that Victoria herself be in the interview as well. With a career as a pop singer, she said it would be great to push her new single, 24 Hour Dancefloor.

At the launch on September 28 in South Kensington's nightclub for super-Sloanes, Boujis, there were pictures of the star-in-the-making and her dad bopping lovingly together, on the aforesaid dancefloor, to her latest creation.

One of the tabloids noted: "He used to be a political mover and shaker – now he's moving and shaking on the dance floor. When he wasn't strutting his stuff, Mr Aitken spent time chatting to former German politician Count Carl Eduard von Bismarck, the great-great-grandson of the German Chancellor."

Victoria, who is dotty and fun and infectious, gets me to take a picture of her on my phone against a white background in Buswell's Hotel in Dublin (where she is staying with her father) for a visa application for Abu Dhabi where she is giving a performance this week. She then rings someone, presumably in Abu Dhabi, and says she knows the Minister For Culture. She says the biggest misconception people have about her is "that I am a bimbo party girl".

She has been on a few dates with a new guy ("very early days") but when I enquire what her relationship status is, to put in this article, she implores me to say single – "Otherwise it might scare other guys away," she laughs, adding: "I am romantic. I love it when guys are traditional and buy me flowers etc. What woman doesn't love being swept away with romantic gestures?"

'I don't want to be a weekend lover', she sings on one of her songs. She wrote the lyrics on a napkin in December 2010 while staying at her friend's house in Abu Dhabi "while being sad over the man the song was about".

She also once sang on her song Vicky From The Yacht – her own South Ken take on Jennifer Lopez's Jenny From The Block – about being 'Vicky from the yacht, she's lost all her rocks. Vicky from the yacht, she's got holes in her socks.

'But take it from me, the best things in life are free. Living off Daddy's plastic was so fantastic. Just got a j-o-b, what a misery.'

Does she still think her daddy's plastic is fantastic?

"He's not rich anymore," the beautiful early thirty-something says (She doesn't want to reveal her age nor be photographed: "I haven't brought any make-up!")

"He went bankrupt. But if my father had more plastic today it would of course be fantastic." Victoria and her twin sister, Alexandra, grew up as the fantastically privileged daughters of a cabinet minister, with homes in Westminster and east Kent. She also has a half-sister, Petrina, whom a DNA test revealed was the love child of an affair between Jonathan, the cabinet Casanova as some Wapping wag dubbed him, and Soraya Khashoggi, the onetime wife of Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi. "My sisters are great, they are both fantastic. I love them," she says.

Asked about God, Jonathan says he is committed to his faith. "There are many paths to God," he says adding that Petrina sent recent emails to say that she has been doing a Christian teaching Alpha Course in a church in California and had a great experience – "which brought her closer to God. She is taking it very seriously."

Victoria was educated at some of the most elite schools in Europe, Aiglon College in Switzerland and then Schule Schloss in Germany. "It was great going to schools abroad as I learnt German and French and it gave me an international outlook on life. I also went to Rugby School," she says, meaning one of England's oldest private schools. "There were 200 guys and 20 girls."

She describes her childhood as "wonderful ... travelled the world. My parents took me everywhere. My mother loves travelling and sightseeing so we saw everything from tombs in Egypt to snorkelling in the red sea – to the beauty of Rajasthan India." (Her sister Alexandra lives in India now and is a committed Sikh.)

That bliss was obliterated with the case and the disastrous fall-out. Her father's fall from grace was absolute. With over £2m in legal costs, he was bankrupt, his grim financial situation as reduced as his reputation. Victoria moved to America, enrolling in college in Washington. Her parents divorced.

I ask Victoria now how did her parents break-up affect her emotionally.

"Well, he was in jail – and I was 18 and away at Georgetown University in the USA so I didn't have to switch between homes or anything like that. So everything was chaos," she says with admirable honesty. "At least they divorced when I was away at university. So it wasn't like I grew up in a split-parent home or anything.

"Anyway it was just one extra thing that happened in the bankruptcy – jail, newspapers trashing everyone. So it all happened at once. I'm not sure I can separate what affected me more, it was just one big crash at that point. But sure, what ever doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

"My parents are still very good friends. I had dinner with them last week. People say 'that crazy family'. But that is kind of cool. When my father got married to Elizabeth, there was my mother, my step-mother, and my half-sister's mother.

"My father is an extraordinary man. You could bring him anywhere, put him with any people, and he'd fit right in anywhere."

Tonight in Buswells hotel, opposite the Dail, he cuts quite a dapper figure, long and lean – he runs six miles several times a week in London – in a well-cut jacket. His hair looks immaculate. It puts me in mind of a story Jonathan is fond of telling about Margaret Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary Fergus Montgomery and how she once complimented him on his smart appearance. When Montgomery explained that he had just been to the hairdresser, Thatcher responded: "I expect you had a blow job." Aitken doubtless believes she meant blow dry. Less light hearted was what he calls his self-inflicted agonies of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail. "But life goes on," he says. "It takes some adjusting to. I had a good family. I think I'm probably a resilient person by nature. I don't spend time agonising over mistakes. You move on."

It can't have been easy to move on, of course. As The Observer's political editor Nicholas Watt said, with perhaps a touch of schadenfreude, Jonathan Aitken "was the only cabinet minister of the 20th Century to be jailed".

I ask Victoria what was it like as a daughter to see her father put through such a high-profile media mortification.

"It wasn't easy," she says, slowly, clearly emotional at the memory. "I remember going to visit him in jail. There he was in a prison outfit with two guards on either side.

"I still look back on that time," her father says now, adding that when he was released from prison he was a changed man but "it was a slow process. Events were changing me, in any case. We lost our nice family home. We lost two of them."

As a consequence, Jonathan lived "for a bit" in the seminary at an Anglican theological college (an avowedly religious man, he still studies theology "in an amateurish way") and "then my sister lent me a place", he says referring to actress Maria. "But gradually, I was sort of getting going and rebuilding. My children moved all over the world. Victoria went to university in America. But you know the disruption of a family ... " he says and stops. "All prison sentences are sentences not just on the defendant but on the defendant's family."

I ask him did that make him feel very guilty.

"Yes. Yes. Definitely."

And how did he deal with that heavy guilt?

"I'm not sure I did deal with it. Facts are facts. There was an upheaval. It was a painful upheaval – family were blown to the four winds. But in terms of human communication, we kept together. We didn't become alienated. We were physically moved around but I have a very good relationship with my ex-wife and I have since remarried," he says, referring to Elizabeth whom he married on June 25, 2003, at St Margaret's Church, Westminster. The ceremony was attended by Norman Tebbit, Malcolm Rifkind, a few ex-cons he'd befriended in Belmarsh and one of the bridegroom's most famous exes – after Carol Thatcher – Lady Antonia Fraser.

The beautiful bride and the born-again ex-minister have " a good and happy relationship," he says, adding that she is not well at the moment. (In July she suffered a severe brain haemorrhage). "We're married almost 11 years. She was formerly married to two movie stars. One of them a very famous Irish movie star, Richard Harris. So I have a hard act to follow as a husband," he laughs. Elizabeth has also been married to Rex Harrison.

"I liked Richard a lot in his last years." Jonathan mentions that he was present at the famous occasion where Richard was very sick in The Savoy in London, where the ailing Irish actor was living. When he didn't return calls, Elizabeth, her eldest son and Jonathan went into the hotel and found "a very sick man indeed. We dialled 999", Jonathan recalls. And quickly nurses and doctors arrived. Harris was carried down from his apartment in The Savoy on a stretcher. The elevator in the Savoy came out at almost exactly the place where people were then going into the entrance of the Savoy Grill for lunch. There was a queue of rather grand figures, Jonathan remembers, and Richard, semi-conscious, sees what he identifies as his last audience.

"He hauls himself out of the stretcher and says in a booming actor's voice: 'Look at me! It is the hotel food that's done this!'

"He died about two months later."

Jonathan adds: "But Richard was a great encourager of mine with Elizabeth. He had been divorced from her for 25 years. We were going out. He used to sent me little notes with drawings and tactical suggestions about Elizabeth. We have been very happy since." They live in her smart apartment in Kensington.

He earns his living primarily by writing books – "I think I have written seven or eight since coming out of prison" – and also by writing columns for The American Spectator as well as various British publications, and some business consulting. "But quite a big chunk of my life is pro-bono charitable work. It is almost all focused on charities that work with prisoners or the rehabilitation of offenders."

Victoria, the besotted daughter, then says that he used all his prison cards to call her in America. "Do you remember that, dad?"

He smiles at her.

"You only got an allowance of five pounds for a prison card which was enough to say: 'Hello Victoria! I love you!'"

"You only get so much money on prison wages," he explains, "I was the prison toilet cleaner. My wages were the princely sum of five pounds, 60 a week. I used to get bonuses for keeping the loos so clean. You spend your wages on phone cards. The trouble with having a daughter in Washington DC is that it is so expensive. A pound goes by so quickly." Therefore on his wages, he remembers, all he could afford to say was: "This is daddy. I love you. Sorry I can't say more. It is going to run out."

"Then you would hear a pip pip pip on the line and the line would go dead," Jonathan half-smiles.

I ask Victoria did she almost have to put on an act when he rang from prison? You didn't want to break down and cry and make him feel worse than he already did?

"Absolutely. I would just say how wonderful university was."

"We were all puffing up on our prison calls," Jonathan says. "Shall I get another glass of wine for both of us while you talk to Victoria?" he asks me before going into the bar of Buswells where he is certainly the only person there who had 'Dev' at their baptism. When he returns with the wine, maybe I am a little bit nearer to knowing the real Jonathan Aitken: human and flawed like the rest of us. That's no disgrace.

Margaret Thatcher: Power & Personality by Jonathan Aitken is published by Bloomsbury, priced €25.

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