

JUST LIKE her daddy; With a ruthless ambition worthy of her father, Ghislaine Maxwell has clawed her way back from the brink of ruin. Now she's the toast of New York but has she fallen under the spell of an equally questionable tycoon?

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Body

ON THE wealthy Upper East Side of Manhattan, 80 well-connected guests gathered in a grand Pounds 6 million town house to celebrate the opening of a new shop belonging to designer Allegra Hicks, granddaughter-in law of Earl Mountbatten.

The night before the party, the hostess had been inundated with calls from disgruntled socialites, irked that they hadn't received an invitation.

The hostess greeted their objections with her customary charm, but remained unmoved. As always, her list had been carefully edited, and she intended it to stay that way.

Among the select few were Hollywood star Matthew Modine, Kennedy family member Mrs Anthony Radziwill, Peggy Siegel, PR consultant to the stars, and Julie Janklow, heir to a literary dynasty.

There was a Rockefeller on the list, as well as the inevitable countesses, billionaires and New York luminaries. The guests spent the evening sipping vintage Dom Perignon champagne from cut crystal glasses before toasting their hostess - the woman whose immaculate society credentials had drawn them all together.

As the glasses of such an elite set were being raised in her honour, she must surely have felt as if she had finally made it in New York. After the toast, she took the guests into the townhouse's imposing library. There, they were confronted with yet more evidence of how seriously their hostess took the social pecking order.

She had stuck fake spines on the books, with titles referring to her best friends.

According to an eyewitness, this led to something of a scramble among the guests as they struggled to see if they had made it as one of her book titles: 'There was ferocious competition between guests as they compared how far up the friendship pecking order they were.' So just who is this superstar society hostess who has New York's rich and talented clamouring for admission to her inner circle? None other than Ghislaine Maxwell, the youngest daughter of the late newspaper tycoon and fraudster, Robert Maxwell.

It was in 1991 that Maxwell plunged from the deck of his Pounds 15million luxury yacht - a 180ft vessel named Lady Ghislaine after his daughter - and soon afterwards it was discovered he had stolen Pounds 440 million from the Mirror Group pension fund.

Ghislaine's reputation, like that of the rest of her family, was in tatters.

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As it became clear that Maxwell's employees had lost their pensions because he had raided them, any member of the Maxwell family seen living the high life provoked contempt and fury.

Ghislaine soon caused outrage by being photographed boarding Concorde while at the same time publicly speaking of her financial struggle - her father, she lamented, had left her only an annual Pounds 80,000 trust fund to live off.

She compounded the error when she maintained she could not understand why people felt anger towards her. Increasingly, she was seen to be resolutely unsympathetic to Maxwell's victims and, astonishingly, sought to defend her father's behaviour even after it became clear he had defrauded so many of his employees.

Before long, there was the inevitable speculation that she was living off stolen money and Ghislaine was said to have taken to wearing a disguise in Britain to avoid recognition.

But it was a different story in America, where Ghislaine found she could do as she pleased - and over the years she has taken full advantage of this attitude. As her party for Allegra Hicks shows, Ghislaine has now managed to manoeuvre herself into the very heart of New York's business and Hollywood elite.

But given the straitened circumstances she complained of, the crucial question is: How has she done it?

The answer almost certainly comes in the shape of a once glamorous American billionaire financier named Jeffrey Epstein - a man now waiting to stand trial in Florida after being accused of paying underage girls for tawdry sexual encounters.

Epstein, it seems, took Ghislaine under his wing when she arrived in New York a broken and lonely woman and helped her not only back on to her feet but also to become one of the most sought-after members of the city's social elite.

Ghislaine, 46, first met Epstein, 54, in New York in 1991, the year of her father's death and a time when she was said to be desperately lonely. She was instantly attracted to him - a man as flamboyant, dominant and rich as the father she had just lost.

In no time, she was appearing at Epstein's side as the 'celebrity' guest at the opening of a glamorous Manhattan restaurant. She was also a regular guest at his Upper East Side apartment. Very soon, a friend reported that 'her dependence [on Epstein] is pretty total'.

At one time, there were even rumours they would marry.

Epstein provided for Ghislaine a life of glamorous parties, exotic vacations and well-connected friends. He showered her with gifts: Pounds 300 bottles of champagne, grand holidays and offered her the use of his mansions and seven cars.

Together, they lived life to excess.

But most important, Epstein helped Ghislaine forget her past.

Through him, she began to build a respectability in New York that would have been impossible in London, where Maxwell's crimes were less easily forgotten.

Epstein was not, however, altogether straightforward. He may have been a firm fixture on the social scene but he had, to say the least, an opaque professional history - a little like Robert Maxwell.

He is rumoured to have worked either for the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad, the CIA or even both. On one occasion, he arrived in London at the home of a British arms dealer bringing a 'gift' - a New York police-issue pump action shotgun. 'God knows how he got it into the country,' said a friend.

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He has been described as a onetime maths teacher at a private school for girls and as a concert pianist. More recently, he has been given the vague title of 'property developer'.

And while his assets include a Pounds 3million Palm Beach mansion, a 26,000-acre Mexico City estate and a priceless Picasso, the exact origins of his fortune are not clear - although through his company, J. Epstein and Co, he manages the fortunes of around 15 clients with at least Pounds 500million in assets.

But while he indulged Ghislaine financially, Epstein - like Maxwell - could be cruel. 'He is a strange man,' one friend is reported to have said early on in their relationship. 'Not dislikable but difficult to understand. He can treat her very well or very badly. He can be impatient, demanding and extremely critical of her. At the same time he is kind and protective.'

Ghislaine was madly in love with Epstein - and said to be desperate to marry him - but Epstein would not commit himself and openly dated other women.

Inevitably, their romance fizzled out but Ghislaine remained firmly in Epstein's life. Ghislaine is said to have repaid him for his kindness to her when she first arrived in New York by introducing him to high society and potential business clients through contacts she made during her school days at Marlborough, and through her father's illustrious friends.

Thanks to Ghislaine, Epstein partied at Sandringham and Windsor with Prince Andrew, and attended a birthday party for the Queen.

Thanks to Epstein, Ghislaine scaled the heights of New York society. It has been a very successful partnership.

But he is not the sole reason for her success. Just as her father in his heyday was feted by high society and dubbed 'the Bouncing Czech' because of his resilience, so she is every bit as steely.

The similarities between Robert Maxwell and Ghislaine are striking. Like her father, Ghislaine has verve and energy but above all she shares his lethal brand of charm. Even Maxwell's enemies have been forced to concede that he had an unbridled charisma which was in part responsible for his success.

'She is able to entrance anyone she chooses. She is very manipulative and winds people round her finger,' a friend reveals.

However, it was not until Maxwell's death that she began to exhibit her father's ambition. Ghislaine had always preferred socialising to working. Yet when left with virtually nothing after her father drowned, she came into her own.

Boarding the yacht with her mother Elisabeth, shortly after her father's death, Ghislaine appeared grief stricken, yet totally in control. Wearing a red tartan suit, she coolly walked into her late father's office and - according to journalist John Jackson who is said to have witnessed the scene - shredded all incriminating documents on board.

Ghislaine denies this ever took place, but Jackson has never retracted the claim.

If true, those documents were the key to Maxwell's financial empire and Ghislaine, astutely, was making sure they would never come back to haunt the Maxwell family.

In the aftermath of his death, she was defiant in the face of the criticism and jibes levelled at her father - such as the joke made by a Maxwell employee that, on the morning he left for the boat, he was 'buoyant'. Like Maxwell, who never betrayed the fact that his empire was crumbling, Ghislaine was adept at masking her emotions.

But today, just as Ghislaine's social cachet is enjoying an all-time high, her association with Epstein threatens once again to mar her reputation and even to destroy all she has achieved.

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Epstein is due to appear in court in November following an 11-month undercover investigation by police after the stepmother of a 14-year-old girl claimed she was paid Pounds 150 to give him an erotic massage at his flamingo-pink villa.

The underage girl is said to have been taken there by an 18-year-old student, Haley Robson, who told police she was recruited at the age of 17 to provide the billionaire with a nude massage for a fee of Pounds 100 - and later was asked by Epstein to provide him with a series of young girls.

While Epstein has robustly denied the charges, friends have rallied around him, including Donald Trump, who once said: 'He likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side.' Jeffrey Epstein's life may be about to crash as resoundingly as Ghislaine's father's once did. If convicted, he faces a lengthy prison sentence. And while no longer romantically involved, Ghislaine and Epstein are still inextricably bound together socially and in business.

So what will Ghislaine Maxwell do if she is once more faced with the man in her life losing everything? The answer is simple. Born of a tyrannical, dishonest but charming father whom she never deserted, Ghislaine will inevitably stand by her man.

No matter how reviled, or disgraced Epstein finds himself, friends of Ghislaine are in little doubt about her loyalty to him. And judging by her past form, she will survive - even if Epstein doesn't.

Graphic

THE MAXWELL FACTOR: LIKE THE FATHER SHE IDOLISED (ABOVE), CAPTAIN BOB'S DAUGHTER GHISLAINE HAS ACHIEVED SUCCESS ON HER OWN TERMS

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