



Three Strand Pearl Necklace; The Divorce of the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, Edinburgh 1963 (Four Scots Trials)

A M Nicol

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As the first of the four trials in this series, this was the divorce proof which shocked Britain in the so-called 'Swinging Sixties' when the eleventh Duke of Argyll divorced his second wife Margaret amidst enough dirty linen to give the 'investigative journalists' of the time enough copy to last for decades.

The Duchess was the Paris Hilton of her time but in a more judgemental age, and like her modern counterpart, she was wealthy enough to indulge herself in her pursuit of pleasure and excitement. She paid the price financially then socially when His Grace produced the infamous 'headless man' Polaroids at the divorce proof, ensuring her eternal ridicule and sparking off a debate about the link between morality and national decline.

Even before the hearing, both parties amply demonstrated that the first casualty of divorce is often dignity. The Duchess plotted to have the Duke's sons disinherited by spreading malicious rumours and feigning pregnancy; she urged friends to commit perjury in a case linked with the divorce, and as the marriage disintegrated, she openly began new relationships, seemingly unaware of her scheming husband's plans to ruin her.

The Duke tried to set her up as the 'guilty' party, arranged for her car to be bugged, sold the 'secrets' of his sex life with the Duchess to a sensationalist Sunday newspaper and even had his manhood compared with that of the 'headless man' to prove that his wayward spouse was pleasuring a partner other than him.

Even the legal personnel contributed to the absurdity of the occasion with the judge describing Her Grace as having a 'sex perversion', and - creating an air of disbelief that the case was a mere fifty years ago - counsel earnestly submitting that an allegation of sexual liaison as early as nine o' clock in the morning was inherently unlikely.

Yet what degenerated into a squalid and desperate contest had begun in such romantic fashion when the Duke and his bride-to-be spent every hour together, her falling in love with a 'troubled but charming man' who had predicted that they would one day be united.

The fallout from the divorce also had powerful political repercussions involving a Cabinet Minister and a famous Hollywood actor as a prurient public played at guessing the identity of the man or men in the snaps, the truth finally revealed nearly forty years after the publication of the hard hitting judgement.

Of course, the implications for the Duchess were lifelong and tinged with sadness.

Would she have done it all again ?

Most definitely !

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