

Mistress in a gilded cage

By Anne Summers

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IN HIS talk at Readings bookshop the other day, the writer Alain de Botton claimed that the rise of marriages based on love, rather than property, in the mid-18th century meant the end of the mistress.

Perhaps he was unaware of the drama taking place a few suburbs away in Kew, where the cardboard box king Richard Pratt lay dying. Among the many celebrated visitors to his death bed, none attracted more public attention than Shari-Lea Hitchcock, his long-term mistress who, it was reported, was permitted by Pratt's family, presumably including his wife, Jeanne, to spend an hour with him to say goodbye.

Maybe the mistress disappeared briefly from history in the late-18th century while spouses discovered the previously unattainable delights of connubial bliss. If so, someone forgot to tell Madame de Pompadour, who basked in the title of *maitresse en titre* to Louis XV from 1745 to 1750.

The history of the past century (at least) is littered with examples of women who have entered into enduring sexual relationships with well-known men who happened to be married. You only need think of Camilla Parker-Bowles' long public relationship with Prince Charles.

Bowles' great-grandmother, Alice Keppel, was for many years mistress to Edward VII.

It is not essential for a man to be royal to maintain a mistress, but he does need to be rich.

Anyone can have a fling, an affair, or even a long, simmering romance with someone to whom they are not married.

But what distinguishes a mistress from a girlfriend is that she is kept. To be able to keep a woman in the style that makes it worth her while to surrender her independence, serious money is needed.

These days, the definitions get a bit blurred. I have seen Blanche d'Alpuget, Diana Bliss, Jennifer Flowers, Marilyn Monroe and even Anne Boleyn described as mistresses when, strictly speaking, they were the paramours of, respectively, Bob Hawke, Alan Bond, Bill Clinton, John F. Kennedy and Henry VIII. But there is no doubt the mistress is back — in vogue and in the spotlight.

Hitchcock was the classic mistress: the girl in the gilded cage, lavishly provided for but in no way in charge of her own destiny.

Pratt may have put her through law school and encouraged her to forge a career, but she was still on a leash. A golden leash — which in Hitchcock's case included a luxury mansion, a monthly allowance and a car and driver — but a leash nevertheless. A mistress must be on call whenever her master needs her, but there is little chance he will ever marry her.

It is a deal many women today would find abhorrent, yet there is an undeniable fascination — and even a sneaking admiration — for the

woman who can parlay a rich man's roving eye into lifelong income support. The man, older, often ugly, is the source of even greater fascination for his ability to attract a young and beautiful woman. Being a mistress is not a career path most women can aspire to, even if they are willing to trade self-reliance for a life of luxury (OK, I know that's probably a no-brainer if the alternative is a \$25-an-hour menial job). There is a limited supply of rich men willing to support two households. More often, these rich men will opt for the trophy wife, preferring the status conferred by having the younger, prettier companion permanently on show and on hand, and often in the process quite cruelly discarding the first wife. Sometimes a man will marry his mistress, usually when the circumstances preventing long-time lovers from legalising their union have changed. Prince Charles and Camilla, for example.

When the late Sir James Goldsmith, the British industrialist, finally married Lady Annabel Birley, his mistress of more than 20 years, he declared: "When you marry your mistress, you create a job vacancy."

For some men, having a permanent bit on the side is a habit they don't want to break.

Yet it is also undeniable that many longstanding relationships between moguls and mistresses involve love and respect — and a degree of public recognition that their families may often find very uncomfortable.

Kerry Packer bequeathed more than \$10 million to his mistress, Julie Trethowan, but the Packer family would not have her at his death bed or his funeral. Hitchcock seems to have inherited a great deal more money and the status of being acknowledged by the Pratt family.

The big difference being, of course, that Hitchcock had a child with Pratt. This girl, now 11, is not only set up for life financially but is also counted as part of the family, known to have gone on holidays with Richard and Jeanne and invited to attend the funeral.

But after the death of her master, the mistress has no ongoing role. Any status she enjoyed from her attachment to a rich and powerful man is likely to evaporate.

Hitchcock is not yet 40, young enough to forge a whole new life. If she wants to.

She is reported to have built up an investment portfolio of property and racehorses so she can perhaps look to a future of managing these.

Or she could look for another provider. Hitchcock is said to have defied the convention that mistresses stay faithful to their patrons and has had other liaisons, including with racing mogul Robert Sangster.

There is no well-trodden next step for the mistress. She is on her own. Still in the gilded cage but the door is now open.

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