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Oprah offers debt-ridden Fergie her very own TV show

Daily Mail at 10:34 PM on 24th July 2010

Oprah Winfrey, the 'queen' of American TV, has offered the cash-strapped Duchess of York her own prime-time chat show.

Billionaire Oprah, 56, is launching her own cable channel, the Oprah Winfrey Network, next January, and last week called the scandal-hit Duchess to offer her a deal.

A source close to Sarah Ferguson said last night: 'Oprah made the call this week. They spoke in person and, for Sarah, the offer is a ray of light at the end of a very dark tunnel.'

'Oprah has known Sarah for some time and the Duchess went on Oprah's show to explain herself after her most recent scandal. Oprah has always been impressed by Sarah's ability to pick herself up and reinvent herself.'

'She feels Sarah will be someone viewers of her new channel will be able to relate to on many levels - she's a divorcee, a working mother, someone who has made some very public mistakes and a woman who, like Oprah, constantly battles with her weight.'

Fergie last went on Oprah's show in May to issue a grovelling public apology after being caught by a tabloid newspaper asking for £500,000 to provide access to Prince Andrew. The Prince knew nothing of the 'sting' and the Duchess later returned the £27,000 'down payment' she had received.

On the show, the Duchess admitted she had been drunk when she was secretly taped accepting the money and told Oprah: 'I was not in the right place. I haven't faced the devil in the face because I was in the gutter at that moment.'

She later described her actions as 'idiotic and stupid' yet insisted Prince Andrew and their two daughters Beatrice and Eugenie remained fully supportive of her.

The source said: 'Oprah was impressed by Sarah's ability to face up to her errors and to apologise publicly for them. Americans love people who reinvent themselves and Oprah believes Sarah can do that on the new network.'

'Sarah also believes her chances of finding meaningful work in Britain are negligible and she has always felt more accepted in America.'

The idea would be for her to be based in New York so that she could return to England regularly to see the Princesses. At the end of the day she needs to earn a living.' The 50-year-old Duchess is believed to be around £2million in debt and her staff members have all been dismissed. She still lives with Prince Andrew at Royal Lodge, his official residence in Windsor.

Oprah is believed to be ploughing millions into the new channel. One show will be a behind-the-scenes look at her own hit talk show, which is coming to an end after 25 years. Other planned shows include Visionaries: Inside The Creative Mind in which celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Avatar director James Cameron talk about their art; In The Bedroom, a sex advice show, and Breaking Down The Bars about female inmates.

The Oprah Winfrey Show is America's highest-rated chat show and has turned its host into the richest TV star in the States, with a fortune estimated at £1 billion.

A spokesperson for Oprah did not return calls for comment last night.

.... but she won't get a penny from Andrew

By Katie Nicholl

The Duchess of York has been told she will not receive a penny from her ex-husband Prince Andrew, even though she is said to be on the verge of bankruptcy. Andrew, who earlier this month had vowed to help the Duchess out of debt, will not be offering any financial assistance.

Sources close to the Prince say that while he is happy to advise Sarah Ferguson on how to get out of her dire financial situation, he will not be offering her a cash payout.

Just weeks ago the Prince instructed his office to sack his ex-wife's team of aides - including personal assistants, secretaries, a long-standing dresser, a hairdresser and a personal trainer - because she could no longer afford to employ them. Many had not been paid for months and all of them are said to be devastated that they are no longer in full-term employment.

However, Andrew's well-intentioned decision to get involved appears to have backfired. The Duchess has apparently told friends that she is 'devastated' by the Prince's heavy-handed approach with her former coterie of aides, many of whom she counts as friends. 'It has all been handled in a very abrupt manner by the Duke's staff and there are a lot of very upset people,' one of the Duchess's closest friends told The Mail on Sunday last week.

'There needed to be cost-cutting measures, clearly, but the Duke has been absolutely ruthless about how it has been done. He made it clear he was taking control of the situation and the axe just came down. The reality is Sarah has had all control taken away, she has no office, no staff, nothing. No thought at all has been given to the long term.

'Sarah is in a very bad place at the moment, and she has been offered no financial aid from Andrew, which is frankly astonishing.'

The Duchess owes a firm of solicitors more than £200,000 and has a string of failed business deals which have resulted in her being reportedly close to £2 million in debt.

Although she has a circle of close billionaire friends including Sir Richard Branson - whose 60th birthday she has just helped celebrate on his private Caribbean island of Necker - and the US newsprint tycoon Peter Brant, the Duchess has said she 'cannot' ask her friends for money.

'Sarah feels she can't ask her friends for money. She knows she has a self-destruct button and has got herself into this mess, but surely Andrew could help her out?' one friend told The Mail on Sunday.

'The feeling is that Andrew has just left her marooned with absolutely nothing. We all feel very sorry for her. How on Earth is she expected to get back on her feet?'

Royal sources last night insisted that how Prince Andrew spent his private money was his own business, but he has always enjoyed a cordial relationship with his ex-wife. She has living quarters at his Royal Lodge in Windsor and the couple still holiday together with their daughters Beatrice and Eugenie.

But some believe her husband's decision not to offer her any financial aid could overshadow their friendship.

Although she is understood to be bound by a confidentiality agreement that prevents her from talking about the couple's marriage and their 1996 divorce, there is nothing to stop the cash-strapped Duchess from discussing her current situation.

She has claimed the divorce settlement entitled her to just £15,000 a year - although Royal sources later said she and her daughters had received around £3 million from the Royal family.

'If it wasn't for the girls, I suspect Sarah would probably have sold out by now,' says one source. 'Although Sarah knows she has got herself into this mess, the fact is Andrew is in a position to help her financially. He made millions from the sale of their former marital home.'

The Duchess has never asked for a penny from Sunninghill Park, which Andrew sold to a Kazakh friend for £15million.

A spokesman for the Duke last night declined to comment. The Duchess's spokesman was unavailable for comment.