

I wouldn't mind one of my daughters deciding she'd become a

His 'livelihood' cost him years in prison but it brought him millions, fame and some strange family values

HIS legendary charm pours down the telephone. There's his smoky Richard Burton voice with its Welsh lilt, his charisma and bonhomie. And it's almost possible to envisage his boyish Mick Jagger features as he talks, particularly when he asks whether I know what he looks like. But apparently I'm wrong, for he says he was disguised in that photograph. "Just look out for someone who appears out of place in the hotel foyer," he adds furtively.

Oh Lord, can't he just say that he'll be wearing such and such, or that he'll meet me by the reception desk? You know, just behave normally? But it seems that if this man were to drop his clandestine habits he'd go cold turkey. Anyway, I spot him immediately, the incarnation of the photo I'd described.

He is Howard Marks, once the world's biggest cannabis smuggler and formerly Britain's most wanted criminal. He imported more than 1,000 tons of hashish over two decades into the States and Europe, making about £50,000 a ton; "disappeared" for seven years until 1980 after he'd jumped bail; and served seven years in America's toughest penitentiary, until his release two years ago.

Last year he published his autobiography, *Mr Nice* (after one of his aliases). So the story is familiar now of how he was a working-class lad from a Welsh mining village who gained a scholarship to Balliol, then drifted into dealing to assuage his own 20-joints-a-day habit.

Also familiar is how the Press dubbed him "Narco Polo", while reporting his involvement with MI6, the CIA, the Mafia and even the IRA. And how he had 43 aliases, 89 phone lines, owned 25 companies for laundering his money and opened more bank accounts than he can remember.

After the charismatic voice, Marks in the flesh is a disappointment — smaller than I'd imagined, with a drinker's nose and dissolute look. He wears gym shoes with undone laces, a scrumpled shirt and gold medallion on his chest to go with his hometown Majorcan tan and shoulder-length hair. He speaks like a superannuated hippie, boasting about getting "loaded" and "out of his head" and laughing uncontrollably at his own delinquent behaviour.

Marks, as befits a 52-year-old, has just been promoting his book in rave clubs and head shops and dropping psychoactive drugs. He smokes cigarettes between mouthfuls in the restaurant, knocks back aperitifs,

wine and liqueurs, informs me often how boring my questions are, and offers farragos instead of facts. "I'm a very good liar — it's difficult to tell when I'm lying," he says nonchalantly, as my initial impression of him goes to pot.

He stood this year during the General Election for four seats in Neath, Norwich South, Norwich North and Southampton Test on the single-issue ticket of legalising cannabis. Had he won, he'd have been permitted to take only one seat.

He wants to legalise the drug for the sake of civil liberty and because its prohibition leaves its supply in the hands of profiteers and criminalises the young. Unusually for a prospective MP, every last bone of each skeleton in his sleaze closet had already been inspected.

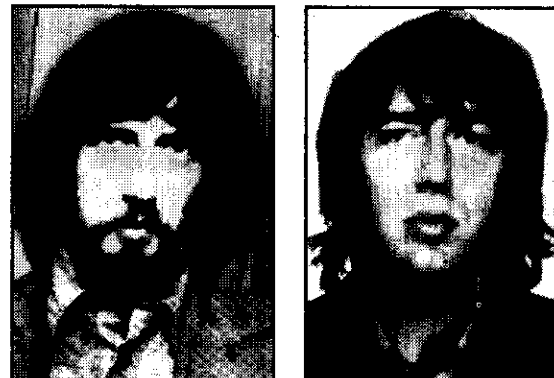
So he forced publicity on his campaign by being unconventional. "I'd walk into a police station smoking a joint and ask them to arrest me," Marks explains. "They refused, probably because three days in prison would

hardly be a deterrent after over 3,000 and they didn't want me to sell more copies of my book." It's hard to resist the thought that Marks's primary motivation — for a deposit of just £500 a constituency — was to publicise his book.

THIS year saw another landmark when Marks took Ecstasy with his daughter Amber, 19, a law student at the London School of Economics. Father and daughter were at a rave in a cave in Majorca when they tried the drug for the first time.

Don't most parents attempt to deter their children from taking hard drugs? Or at least not shop them publicly? "Yeah, yeah," he says.

He sees his trip in grand, cultural terms. "I think the biggest rift between children and their parents is probably the Ecstasy culture. I think parents ought to understand their children much better," he says. "Ecstasy helped me bond very strongly with my daughter. I'd been away



POT LUCK: Marks in former drugs-runner guises . . .

daughters prostitute



PICTURE: Tim Clarke

MAN OF THE WORLD: The real Howard Marks today

from her for five years and it enabled me to catch up with her emotionally, which otherwise would have been far more time-consuming."

Marks seems almost devoid of introspection and ethical concerns. Ask him whether it was wise, for example, to have followed a life of crime and he says: "With this stupid law it's going to happen." Was it right to lure innocents into his field? "They came looking for me." What of the people who have languished in prison because of their involvement with him? "The law has to take responsibility for that."

His warped attitude is emphasised when we discuss the Filipino massage parlour he ran with the repellent late Lord Moyrihan. Marks says he likes prostitutes and has used them. "I wouldn't mind if one of my daughters chose to become a prostitute."

Marks has four children, one by a former girlfriend and three by his wife Judy. His view of the effect on his children of his past behaviour and imprisonment shows an

astonishing degree of self-obsession. "They were scarred by it, particularly since my wife went to prison as well, but the worst thing they had to tolerate was the thought of their parents' huge suffering."

MARKS appears unable to conceive how damaging it might have been to them to have been left in the care of a heroin addict, or to imagine their feelings of abandonment or even shame.

His son Patrick, for instance, didn't talk for a year after Marks went to prison. And when he was four he threw himself off a high building and broke his legs. "Whether that was related to my incarceration or too much television, I don't know," Marks adds that he doesn't have any regrets about his own behaviour.

His father was a sea captain and his mother a teacher. In his book, he recounts how his earliest memory was of tossing a live cat into the ocean. He was also physically weak and a swot. "Suddenly I

realised people liked you if you were mischievous, so I became naughty". When he was 10 he was hospitalised with undulant fever (which results in a swelling of the joints). He'd faked the illness by tampering with the thermometer. "I just wanted more attention," he says.

He's unable to offer any psychological insights into what turned him into a criminal. "It's our stupid law," he says simply. "There's no reason to think I'd have been a criminal otherwise. I might have opened a bar in Saudi Arabia but generally I don't steal, kill people or do any of the traditional criminal practices."

He has no plans for the future and, naturally, has nothing as bourgeois as a pension. "Maybe they'll set up an old people's home for hippies and let me see life out taking a variety of class A drugs." Then he concedes that he's considering writing another book — on dope, natch. And that he might resume his earlier career. "I'm an out-of-work dope dealer." The bill arrives. "Did I really sting you?" he asks sweetly.