

# AS SUCCESS SPOILED OUR GARETH?

He was always one of our favourite unfamous actors – as Frederick in “Upstairs, Downstairs” and carrying spears in Shakespearean plays. Now that he’s the latest TV heart-throb, we sent Betty Messenger to find out if he’s still as nice



It looked as if Mike Gambit had brought Steed’s umbrella along to our meeting. It set off his impeccable, sleek dark blue suit to perfection. Neatly rolled, the true Brit’s time-honoured symbol of urbane masculinity and now the world-famous signature of one of TV’s top secret agents.

We stepped from the office into the downpour, and as he opened it protectively above us, he reminded me fleetingly of Frederick the footman of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

It turned out to have a spoke missing and proved useless against the driving rain. Very un-Steedlike and not a good opening gambit.

However, one look at his amused expression revived my suspicion that Gareth Hunt was neither obtusely stiff and correct nor a cool karate-trained slicker, but somebody else entirely about whom I hoped to find out over lunch.

“It’s gone!” A look of pained disbelief washed over his handsome face.

“What’s gone?”

“My car. They’ve towed it away!”

“They”, in fact, had taken it to the police car pound in Islington, and it would cost him £21 plus the taxi fare to be reunited with it.

Only a VW Beetle—not very big, a tiny dot in the scheme of things you’d think, but obviously a big blot on the landscape to some over-zealous traffic warden.

We walked in the teeth of the gale to the restaurant without talking. What do you say to a man who has just lost his love?

It was not the way I’d pictured it at all—this brief encounter with Steed’s glamorous six-foot trouble-shooting side-kick.

In the sheltering warmth of the restaurant we sat side by side, tended by solicitous waiters.

Gareth nodded opposite. “Isn’t that a beautiful picture?”

“Yes,” I replied politely, not realising short-sightedly that we were looking directly at a mirror reflecting the two of us.

I asked him what it was like to be in a £4 million budget TV series (the last series of *The Avengers* sold to 120 countries for over six years) playing opposite the beautiful Joanna Lumley as Purdie, and competing with Patrick McNee for camera time.

Wasn’t he the action-man of the series now that Steed was getting a bit long in the tooth?

He was reticent but honest. “Yes, I suppose I am. But it’s just another job, really, on the way to somewhere else. I don’t want to be a sex-symbol, it’s not my scene. I just give 100 per cent of myself to the part I’m playing.

“I don’t enjoy the publicity bit or being recognised. Only an egotist would say that he enjoyed being recognised. It’s not the success I’m afraid of but its consequences.

“On TV, you’re to a certain extent a product of the public. I can’t feel that I’ve arrived because to me it’s just a stepping stone, something on the way to something else.”

What else?

“Well, I’d like to direct . . . and I’d like to write. Probably I’ll do that later, but it’s something I know I must do.”

He lives in a Victorian terrace

house in Putney that he and his girlfriend, Carrie, have converted and decorated. They found it about 18 months ago.

“When we first saw it we both liked it, but it was unbelievably filthy. The kind of property that no building society will lend you money for unless you do the repairs yourself.

“So you borrow the money to do the repairs yourself, and hope they’ll give you a mortgage so you can pay your other debt eventually. You’re the one who takes the risk; they don’t.

“It’s not finished yet, but it’s a wonderfully satisfying feeling to have achieved something like that; it’s been an immense challenge.”

It’s Gareth’s home now and Carrie, with whom he fell in love after his marriage had broken up, keeps house and cooks.

“She’s an experimental cook, which suits me—I love herbs and vegetables that are not over-cooked. I used to follow the recipes in an evening paper—try them out myself. My favourite is sausage casserole. Have you ever made it?”

I murmured, no, I didn’t think so. . .

“Well, you get some herb sausages and you peel some potatoes, chop them with onions, put them in a casserole to cook with milk, butter, salt and pepper and then, 15 minutes later, you add the sausages.

“It’s amazing how if you time it right the potatoes are just undercooked enough so that they don’t fall apart. It’s one of my favourites and I always feel pleased with myself when I’ve produced it.”

I said I’d try it.

**A** part from being a man of property the only other evidence of his worldly wealth is the Beetle. I pointed out that he could become very rich one day if he continues to make the impact on TV that he’s made lately. But he denies that he has any hedonistic tastes in which he would indulge.

“I smoke a little bit. I drink a little bit. I make love a little bit, and I run a small car. . . No, I don’t think I’m interested in all the things money can bring.

“There isn’t a great deal of incentive to stay in this country because you’re taxed out of existence, and I understand the reason people leave. But I’d certainly stay.

“I’d stay, but I’d fight the system like mad. For instance, if I made a hell of a lot of money I’d plough some of the so-called ‘riches’ back into the business that made me. I’d support a children’s home, too. Of course, I’d like to satisfy my own ego by trying various projects.”

He enjoys singing and has made a record, he loves the theatre and wants to direct and write scripts for films and TV—“but I’d also like to try giving others a chance, just as I was given a chance.

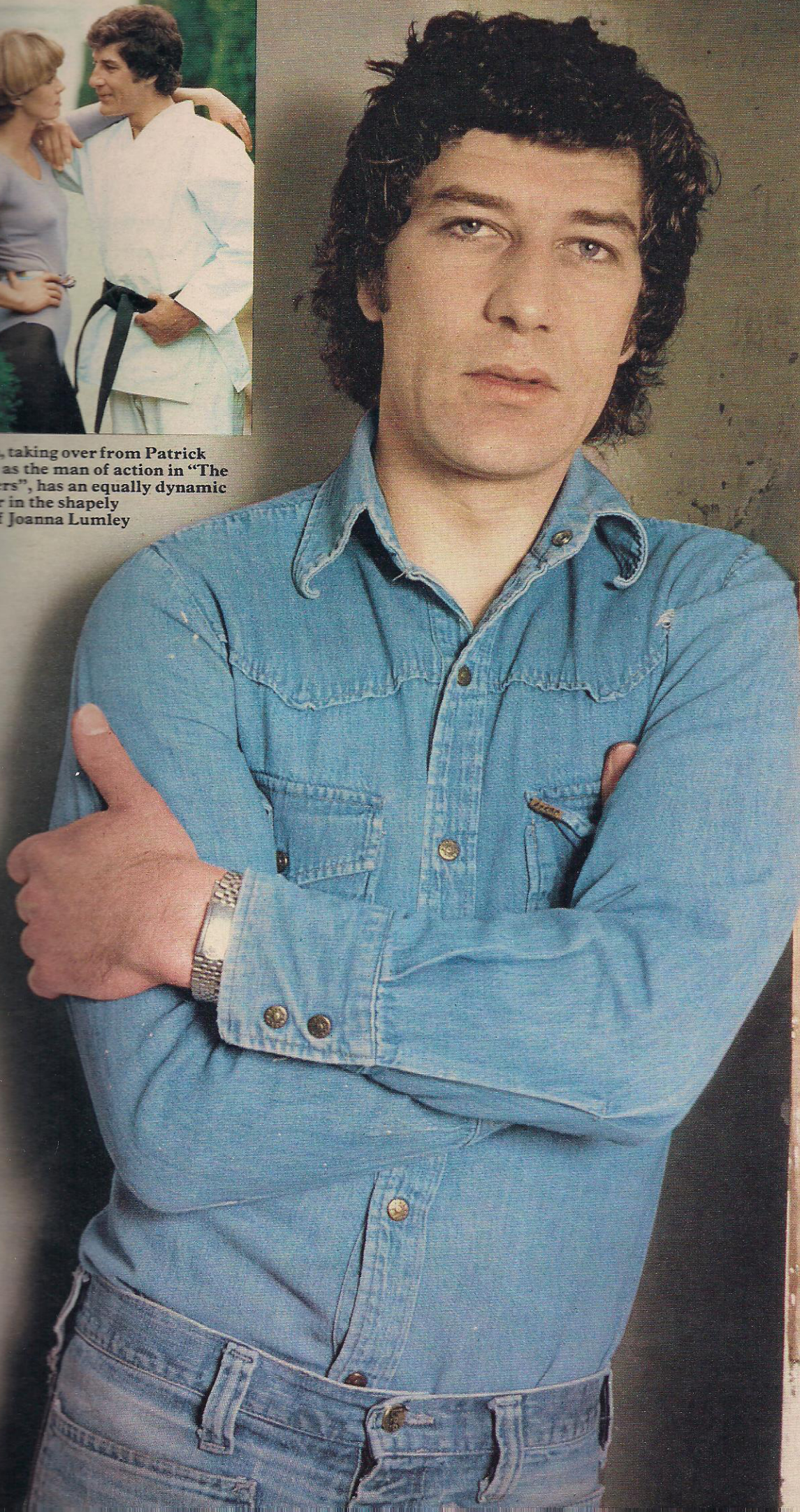
“It’s like farming. If you don’t plough back into the land the equivalent of what you’ve taken out it becomes barren. And, also, it’s no good just squandering the harvest on things that don’t matter.”

Was he talking of the tax man? I





Gareth, taking over from Patrick Swayze as the man of action in "The Untouchables", has an equally dynamic partner in the shapely Joanna Lumley



didn't voice the question but went on to ask about his car.

"Do you mean to tell me that when you get some more money in the bank you're not going to go out like everyone else and buy a new car?"

"Oh, yes. I'd buy a new car. I'd buy another Beetle."

Not a Rolls-Royce?

"No; you can't park a Rolls. It may be lovely for a while to drive a big car, but I like a car I can park easily, that accelerates past a lorry on the M1, and that doesn't run out of petrol."

"When I was coming back from France, I got talking to some lorry drivers on the cross-Channel ferry. They told me they'd just come back through the Persian Gulf where the roads are littered with Rolls-Royces that had run out of petrol. Now that, unfortunately, is how good a car is without petrol."

**D**id he himself ever run out of petrol? "Good question." He considered for a while.

"No, I don't. It's not the work that is hard but the publicity bit. I don't really want to give too many interviews because while you're talking you're searching and questioning your own experience, you could be changing all the time. People may go away and write a lot of rubbish."

"The work never makes me tired; I can immerse myself in a part and get totally lost. I'm a dual personality; I can be totally sad one moment and totally funny the next. Unfortunately, today is a day when I'm a little bit morose."

I said I hadn't noticed it. There was a moment's silence in memory of the towed-away Beetle.

"There are times when I can be very funny," he said as if trying to reassure me that life could be a laugh a minute. "But one can't act out the entire day."

He's aware that in a business like his you need a safe harbour, and for him it's the Victorian house in Putney, and Carrie now that his marriage is over.

"My marriage really came to a difficult phase when I began to be successful—or at least instantly recognisable. How can you put your finger on what really goes wrong in a relationship; it could be a dozen different things."

"I married when I was 21 and I know now that I should never have married at that age. It's difficult for the other partner to understand the stresses, especially if they're not part of the world that is producing them."

He sees his eight-year-old son, Gareth, who lives with his mother in Mitcham, nearly every weekend.

"He looks like me, except that he's blond. Gareth is very like me in temperament, too. He's aware that I'm a well-known actor, but he's not impressed. At his age only immediacy matters."

"He's more interested in the ivy on the wall than the fact that I'm on the box. I'm very pleased he's not overawed. He doesn't want to be an actor, but he's learning to play the piano and I'm pleased about that."

"If I can give anything to him,

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it would be the opportunity to explore every avenue while he's young, and to find out what he'd really like to do."

Gareth doesn't feel he had adequate opportunities in his own childhood although he wasn't aware of a sense of deprivation.

"My father was a coalman. We lived in Battersea by the park when I was very small, and I know we were bombed out twice though I don't remember it. It was very lucky that we were out at the time of the raids. I must have had a charmed life."

For a while Gareth was evacuated to Aldershot where he remembers playing in a field and rushing to a farm gate when an incredible noise signalled the movement of hundreds of tanks—"a never-ending line of huge iron monsters"—along the road. Then he returned to London. His father had died in the war and he now had a stepfather.

He remembers his grandfather's house in Battersea that he loved, one of the little houses in a maze of little streets, now all gone.

"It was a sort of ritual every Sunday to go to my grandfather's. I remember he always had winkles as a kind of *hors d'oeuvres* for lunch.

"There was a front room that you went into only twice a year (and you walked past its polished door on your way to the kitchen at the back). It was a wonderful room to me—very personal and secret.

"It had one of those marvellous huge sideboards, and a three-piece suite covered in dark blue damask with a fruit design of pears and grapes.

"One Christmas, there was a huge box of chocolates there but I wasn't allowed one until Christmas Day itself. However, some burglars beat me to them, for among other things they took the box. And I never did get a chocolate."

He used to play quite safely in the

road outside. There was only one car in his street. Home life was happy but school was not his favourite place.

"I like to think I was before my time. I wasn't particularly bright at school but I wasn't particularly thick, either. I just wasn't learning the kind of subjects that were suited to me.

"We had two very good teachers who once wrote an operetta and they encouraged me a lot. But putting on the couple of plays a year that we did was just like going through the cricket or football season—a part of the system. It wasn't something you were expected to progress towards as a living."

He doesn't really know what drew him towards the theatre as he never went to a play and there was no TV when he was a child; but he used to listen to *Dick Barton Special Agent* on the wireless. "I enjoyed the wireless very much."

**A**fter various jobs from road digger to rep, so he says, he left for the sea and was in the Merchant Navy for six years. I asked him about the three newspaper cuttings I had read which detailed the Avengers-type escapade, when he was clapped into prison with two shipmates for breaking ship in New Zealand, then made a run for it . . .

"That was a figment of my imagination, I'm afraid."

Too bad, I told him; it was now recorded in the archives for posterity's journalists to repeat again and again and again, if they wanted to believe it.

He grinned wickedly.

I asked if he had any heroes.

Yes, Albert Finney, now chief actor at the National Theatre on the south bank of the Thames. Gareth himself had acted in the first Hamlet that Finney played there.

It was time to make the pilgrimage to the Islington car pound for the reunion with a faithful friend. We said goodbye and he went from the "picture" opposite; and something went out of the day.

I stared at the remains of the lobster and wine. It had been a very grand, expensive meal—but I would have settled for sausage casserole, and so, I think, would he. » »



Gareth, hero-worshipped by millions, has a hero of his own . . .