

PURDEY.

BY OLIVIA BOTTUM

"I think we were always ahead of our time with the liberated ladies, such as Cathy Gale and Emma Peel, and the next extension to Women's Lib, I thought, was the woman like Purdey, so sure of herself that she can put her bra back on again."--Brian Clemens, TV Times, November 1977.

In the mid-'60's, Emma Peel had to act aggressively liberated, allowing herself no expression of traditionally "feminine" emotions. By 1977, there was no need to fight so hard for liberation; the NEW AVENGERS' Purdey could be tender as well as tough, frilly as well as fierce. The resulting undercurrent of emotion is one of the fascinations of the NEW AVENGERS three way partnership.

Purdey has as much deadly cool as any of her predecessors, but Clemens made an effort to show she could be vulnerable as well. We see throughout the series her sensitivity to her partners' feelings (her

sympathy with Steed's grief in "Angels of Death" or her cooing over Gambit's hand, injured when it collided with a Cybernaut). In "Obsession," we get a look at Steed's and Gambit's differing sensitivities to her feelings. "Obsession" is a gem of an episode for Purdey fans, giving us more of an inside look at Purdey than any other story. The obsession belongs to Purdey's ex-fiance, Larry Dumas, who years before had broken off their relationship by his mad desire for revenge on a Middle East ambassador whom he blamed for his father's death. Purdey meets him again when she's working with Steed and Gambit on security arrangements for the ambassador's visit to England.

The episode is the story of the conflict between Purdey's own painful feelings and her professional duty. At first she denies to herself and everyone else that meeting Larry in these circumstances is anything but coincidence, not wanting to believe he is still working out his revenge. At the same time she wants to avoid confronting her own feelings of love and hurt. She says very little to Larry, but when she does speak, her

words are short, clipped and sharp with unexpressed anger and hurt. As she begins to realize what Larry is planning, her impulse to protect him battles with her responsibility to Steed.

The first revealing scene is when she's turning down the "cushy assignment" as the ambassador's bodyguard which Steed has arranged for her. When she refuses it, she's supposedly talking to both Steed and Gambit but her eyes never leave Steed's face as she silently pleads with him to understand without pressing her for explanations. Steed doesn't press, however, Gambit would like to. The dynamics of the triangle are demonstrated here: Gambit's strong feelings for Purdey make him protective, possessive, and somewhat jealous. Purdey has deep regard for him as a friend but not, seemingly, as a lover and their bantering keeps the situation good-humored. Purdey is very attached to, perhaps in love with, Steed, who is fond of her but treats her in a fashion more avuncular than romantic.

In "Obsession," Steed quickly
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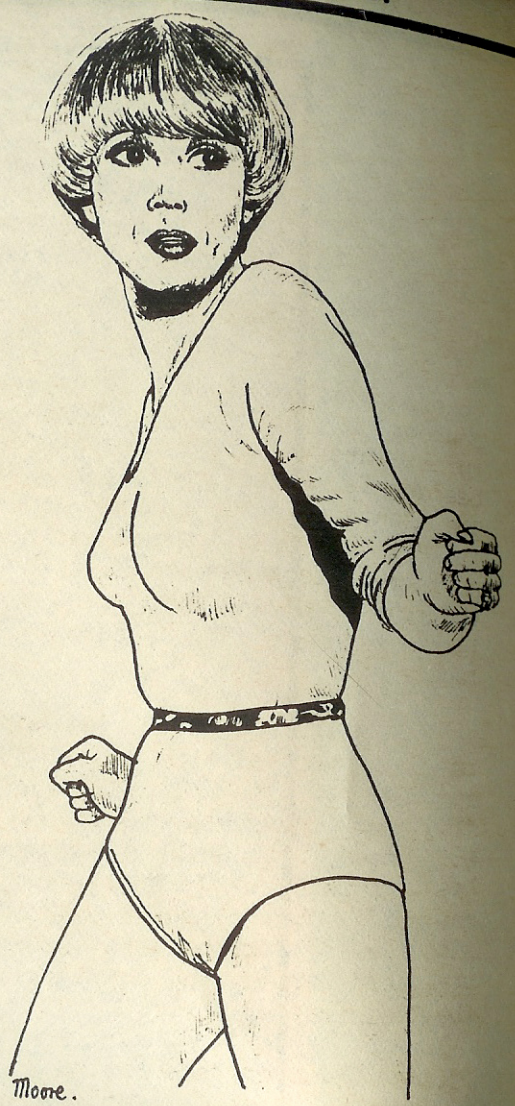
discerns there is something painful between Dumas and Purdey and it concerns him on two levels, a personal concern for Purdey and a professional concern about the ambassador. Steed keeps his questions on the professional level, reminding her that the rules come before personal matters, asking if she knows anything that would relate to the ambassador's safety. Purdey hesitates until the last possible minute before finally telling what she knows about Larry's obsessive desire for revenge. Steed never questions her on the personal level; instead, after they have encountered Larry for the first time and Steed sees her strained reaction, he tells her about being wounded going over the Berlin Wall. He was made to go over a second time as soon as his injuries healed so he could conquer his fear of it. The implication is that she needs to confront and conquer her pain about Dumas. "Berlin" becomes a code word between them during the episode, Steed's acknowledgement of Purdey's pain and a symbol of his support.

The conflict between the personal and the professional provides the drama of this episode and Purdey comes very close to breaking the rules. When she tells Steed where Larry is, she pleads to be allowed to speak to him alone. Steed refuses and she shoots out the tires on his car in order to gain the time she wants. She is in tears as she speeds to the site of their dream house, now a place of death and planned assassination.

The drama culminates in Purdey's attempt to dissuade Dumas from his plans as they stand with guns pointed at each other. Larry is sure she could never kill him and when we look at Purdey, standing with tears

favorite theme with the NEW AVENGERS writers. More light is thrown on the Steed/Purdey relationship in "Hostage," in which Steed breaks all the rules by bringing authentic information to agents holding Purdey. Gambit (who has his own rules versus friendship conflict in this episode) is shocked: "You said break all the rules, Steed, but not that one. Never that one." Purdey is shocked too, and moved as she tearfully throws her arms around Steed. Steed points out that the plans would be obsolete in a couple of months and then says, "These are only papers. You're Purdey." Steed's loyalty to his partners and his willingness to bend the rules and "play his own game" are qualities which make him a top agent. The viewer must decide for himself whether Steed's actions in "Hostage" are the result of personal feeling taking precedence over professional duty, or whether he is simply a good agent doing his job in his usual unconventional way.

Perhaps the most poignant Steed/Purdey moment comes in "Angels of Death." Steed is drugged and held prisoner in an enormous maze. Purdey finds her way to him, but the enemy agents discover her presence and decide to kill them both by crushing them between the moving walls of one of the cubicles in the maze. Steed and Purdey are shoved together and, thinking there's no way out of this one, Purdey puts her arms around Steed and says, "Steed, there's something I must tell you." Fortunately, she doesn't have to make her declaration to Steed because Gambit stops the machinery. The viewer has little doubt about what she was going to say. I'm glad Gambit arrived as Purdey's feelings for Steed is the more effective in the series for being only hinted at and never openly expressed.



to be charitable, because she knows she shares the most important part of Steed's life. This gives her an edge over these ladies who drift in and out of Steed's romantic life. Mrs. Peel was part of Steed's professional life just as Purdey is and she can't be sure Mrs. Peel wasn't part of his personal life as well; thus she is a formidable rival. My biggest disappointment of the series was that Mrs. Peel's appearance in "The Tiger Awakes" was limited to two phone conversations

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The drama culminates in Purdey's attempt to dissuade Dumas from his plans as they stand with guns pointed at each other. Larry is sure she could never kill him and when we look at Purdey, standing with tears streaming down her face, we wonder if perhaps he is right. Arriving on the scene, Gambit kills Dumas. Purdey completely loses her self-control for the only time in the series, screaming, "You shot him" as Gambit attempts to restrain her. Gambit pleads with her to understand, reminding her that the rules in those circumstances are shoot to kill. Finally he asks her, "What if it had been me, Purdey? What would you have done?" She answers slowly, "I don't know. God help me, I don't know," and walks away. She is saying, she doesn't know if she could have killed Dumas even if he had been aiming at Gambit instead of at her. One wonders, would her answer have been any more definite if Steed had been asking?

An AVENGERS girl in tears? One thinks of Tara King and shudders. I am, however, moved by Purdey's tears rather than impatient, as was often the case with Tara's emotion. What is the difference? It's been so long since I've seen any Tara King episodes that I won't attempt a comparison. In "Obsession," Purdey's emotion is wrung from her, almost against her will. Her struggle is with herself, her own feelings, as much as with Steed or Larry, making this episode psychological drama as well as action/adventure. We're often aware throughout the series of the feelings beneath Purdey's usual cool, but seeing them break with that well-controlled surface so violently

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One very human element of Purdey's character is her snippishness about her predecessor, Mrs. Peel. In "The Last of the Cybernauts," Gambit and Purdey discuss the history of the case and give us this lovely understated exchange:

Purdey: "I didn't mention Mrs. Emma Peel."

Gambit: "You never do."

In "The Tiger Awakes," Steed has a phone conversation with Mrs. Peel. We can see Purdey bristle as she snaps, "Mrs. Peel? Calling in reinforcements?"

Purdey's jealousy of Mrs. Peel seems surprising on the surface, since Purdey is very tolerant of Steed's other ladyfriends, such as "that delectable Trish" in "The Last of the Cybernauts" or Suzy in "Hostage." She can, however, afford

and she can't be sure that it wasn't part of his personal life as well; thus she is a formidable rival. My biggest disappointment of the series was that Mrs. Peel's appearance in "The Tiger Awakes" was limited to two phone conversations with Steed. A meeting between Purdey and Mrs. Peel would have been most interesting.

Readers may think this article rather unbalanced, concentrating as it does on Purdey's emotional side while most of her time on screen is spent being cool and deadly. It is true that Purdey's most obvious quality is her coolness and that's precisely what makes the glimpses of the emotion underneath so intriguing. Brain Clemens has called his creations "cartoon characters." However, he and Joanna Lumley have given Purdey a complexity which goes beyond that label, a complexity which depends on these emotional undercurrents. To me, the most interesting episodes were those which allowed Purdey to be the most human. It is to Clemens' and Lumley's credit that Purdey can achieve moments of real emotional depth, which are all the more powerful for the contrast with her usual cool self-control. (8)

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