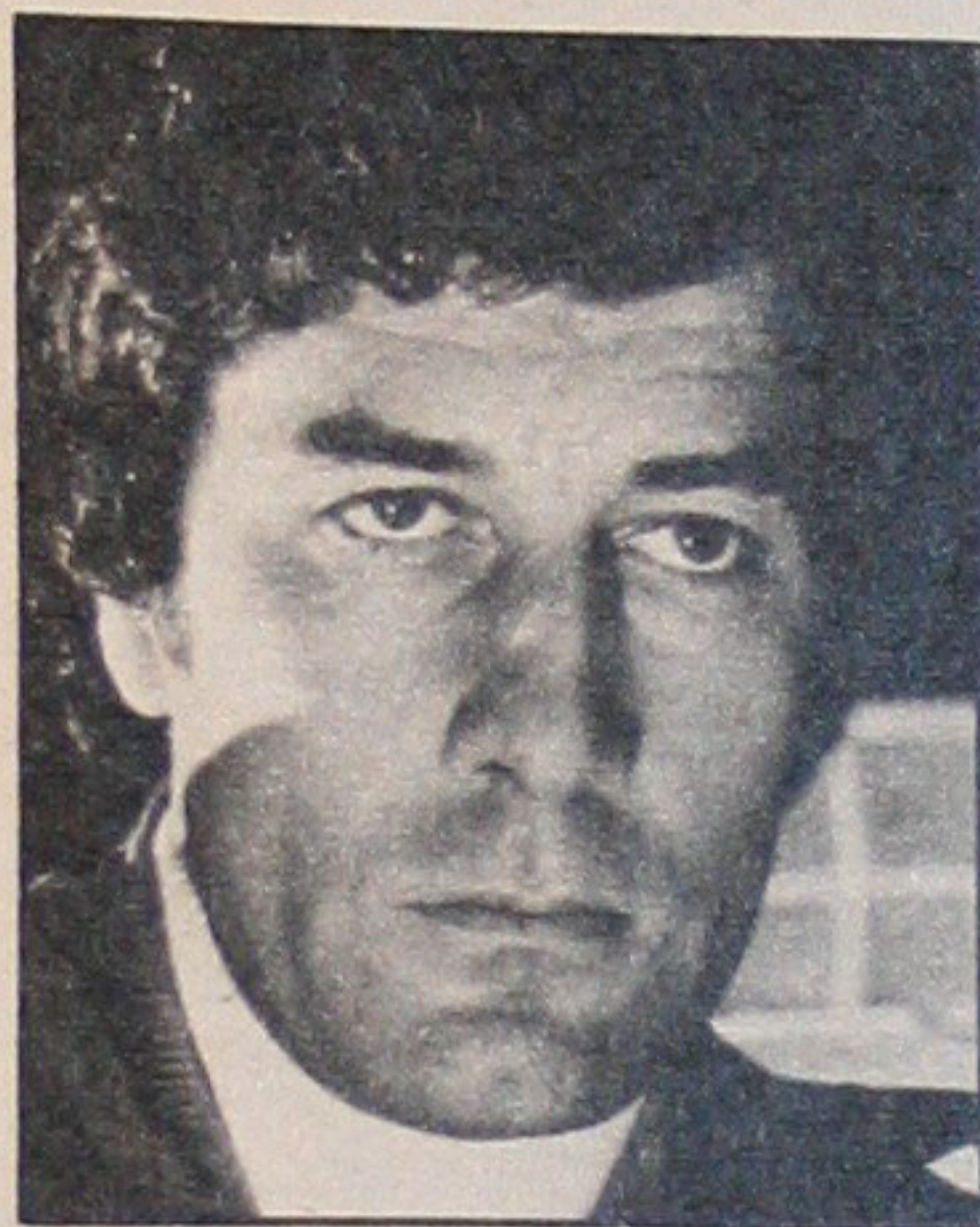


THE SLY FOOTMAN WHO STEPPED UP TO GENTLEMAN THUG

RIGHT FROM the start, *The Avengers* set new styles to catch a thief. There was the urbane, bowler-hatted Steed, whose favourite weapon was a tightly-rolled broly; the leather-suited judo girl Cathy Gale; the steely, sexy, Emma Peel, and liberated, aggressive Tara King. And when a calculating iceberg called Purdey joined Steed in *The New Avengers*, the series introduced viewers to another breed of troubleshooting male—a gentleman thug called Mike Gambit, played by Gareth Hunt.



Gambit would kick down a door as if it were a cardboard box, and karate-chop an adversary with clinical nonchalance. But there'd never be a speck of dust on his well-cut suit.

An inveterate womaniser, he would also do all the nice old fashioned things, like giving up his seat and opening the door for a lady. In fact, there was something of a junior Steed in Gambit: he had all the sweet-talking chat of a charmer, but beneath this easy-going style lurked an uncompromising brute, held in check until the going got rough.

No mean athlete himself, Gareth Hunt spent three nights a week learning karate before filming of the series began. Hunt, who came to *The New Avengers* via the part of Frederick, the sly footman in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, insisted on doing 99 per cent of his own stunts.

"I felt it helped me make the character real," he said. "The first time you dive through a window is daunting, but you soon get used to it."

One of Hunt's more spectacular stunts was in an episode where Gambit had to hang on to the wing of a plane as it took off. The film crew had planned to use a dummy, but on the day when the scene was to be filmed, the dummy failed to

arrive. "I stepped in and did it myself," said Hunt. On another occasion, Hunt was driving fast around a corner for a car chase scene, when he hit a patch of oil and missed crashing into a wall by a matter of inches.

And, as cameras turned for another airfield scene, he was sitting at the controls of a helicopter

which suddenly took off without warning. He had no idea how to get it down — but luckily, a colleague in the cockpit had some knowledge of the machine, and managed to land safely.

His most embarrassing moment came at Pinewood Studios when he was filming a rough-and-tumble scene in which he had to bowl over a villain with a spot of strong-arm acrobatics. As he did a forward roll, he split the seat of his trousers. After that, Hunt tried a little gentle persuasion with the producers to allow him to wear more casual gear for the fight scenes.

Hunt was drafted into the series to add an element of youth: Patrick Macnee, a swash-buckling 38-year-old when he created the part of Steed in the early Sixties, was 54 when he began work on *The New Avengers*. Hunt was 32, and those lived-in looks which made him a popular pin-up didn't happen by chance. Before he became an actor at the comparatively late age of 26, Hunt had been around, travelling the world as a merchant seaman—and seeing the inside of a New Zealand jail for three months when he jumped ship—and doing stints as butcher, baker and vacuum cleaner salesman.

It all helped produce Hunt the talented actor, who can put flesh on parts as diverse as Hamlet and Gambit. How does Hunt himself regard the part of Gambit? "Well, he's a right so-and-so. But he's not just a door-kicking, karate-chopping sex maniac. I hope I made him more subtle."