

MEETING PEOPLE

The bitter regret of Patrick Macnee

A CROWDED set at Pinewood studios... a confusion of lights and cables, half-finished room sets and waiting people. And in the middle of them all, the familiar face of the most famous Avenger of them all, the imperturbable John Steed, complete with bowler hat, furred umbrella, and amused turquoise eyes.

Patrick Macnee is back in the role he last played seven years ago... the role he says has been a passport for him. And he is still rather surprised to be doing it. "If I hadn't been for Chichester and a French commercial for champagne, I wouldn't be here now," he smiles.



PATRICK MACNEE

by SCARTH FLETT

parties I want to say to some people. Do you realise that you have repeated yourself four times? I don't, of course. I just wanted to know how boring I must have been."

Born in London, raised in Berkshire, where his father "Shrimp" Macnee was a well-known horse trainer and schooled at Eton, Patrick has lived abroad since 1952 when he rushed to Canada at a day's notice to become the first actor on Canadian television.

He left behind his wife Barbara whom he had married when he was 19 and their two children Rupert and Jenny who were then five and three, and to this day he bitterly regrets that he ever left them.

"I kept coming back, and then from 1960, when they were twelve and nine, I was here making *The Avengers*, but I felt a tremendous guilt that I left my children. They were sweet and adorable and I missed their formative years.

Today he says he has some good friends, but doubts that he'll marry again.

"I don't want to have a new family at my age. And my sexual needs are not what they used to be. They are enjoyable but not compulsive. Actually I'm rather looking forward to being a grandfather."

"I've been an actor for 37 years and I imagine someone will always offer me a job. To be honest, I rather enjoy life today. I'm so pleased to be still here and I'm delighted to let one day follow another."

It is dark outside, the studios have emptied and it is time for him to leave for his rented cottage at Beaconsfield. He thanks me warmly for travelling all the way to Pinewood just to see him, and I leave him standing at the door, waving and still shoeless.

CLOSE

"I remember Cyril Christopher saying to me that when Richard Burton left, she could understand his leaving her but not the children. She didn't realise then that I had done the same thing. It sounds sentimental, but I think it is the only bad thing I have ever done."

His children, now 29 and 26, have both gravitated to North America. Rupert is a documentary film maker in Toronto, and Jenny is a professional cook in Los Angeles and often lives with her father. The three of them are very close.

Both children say they haven't suffered at all, but that was because of their mother. She has tremendous guts.

Her second husband, whom she was deeply in love with, died recently in Minorca, where they lived, and the least I can do is help and support her.

"Jenny has been with her and now Barbara is coming to

of sweets. I'm told Kissinger eats sweets, though I imagine his reasons for stress are a little greater than mine.

"Look at me when I was in *Sleuth* on Broadway two years ago," he says, pointing to a photograph of a decidedly more streamlined Patrick Macnee. "That is how I will look again in three weeks."

When the series is completed he will leave for his home in Palm Springs, on the edge of the Californian desert, to check up on the state of his garden, and to melt away the pounds he has accumulated, by eating nothing but raw foods, and handfuls of a mixture of sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds, and sesame salt.

He keeps a jar with him all the time and says it helps to take away hunger pains.

"I couldn't keep to this diet all the time... it gets a bit dull, but it cleans you right out. The weight falls off and you feel absolutely marvellous. I swim and play tennis and walk eight miles a day.

COUSIN

"David Niven walks 20 miles a day. A delightful man. He is my cousin, you know, and was a tremendous help to me during my early days in Hollywood in the fifties."

Patrick gave up smoking 80 cigarettes a day five years ago and some years later gave up drinking.

"I found if I didn't drink I had more fun. At dinner

COURTEOUS

Filming is over for the day and we walk briskly through the rain to his dressing-room where he exchanges the stiffly informal brown tweed jacket of Steed for the crumpled white safari jacket of Macnee.

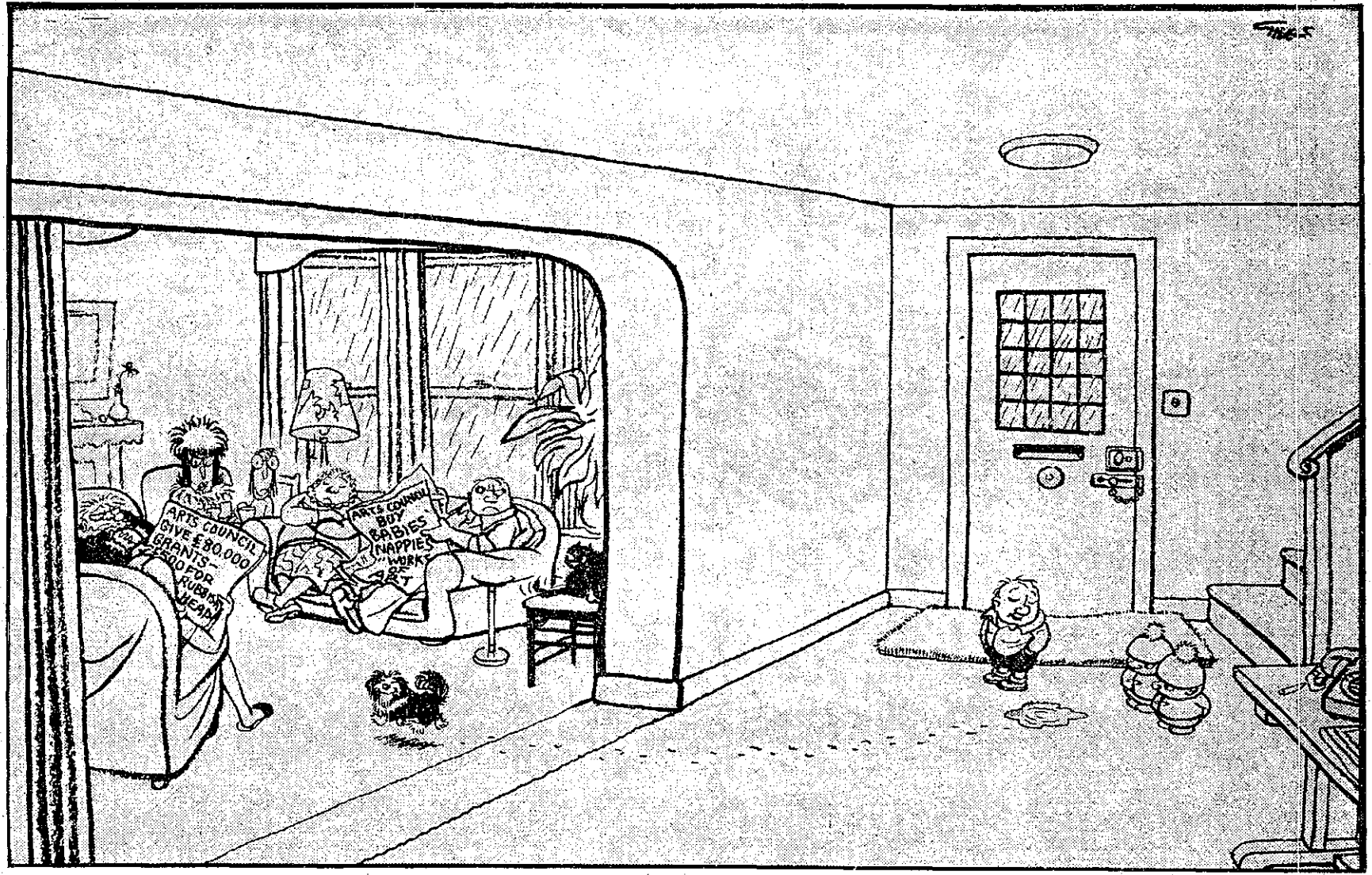
He pulls off his boots and plunks his brown-soaked feet on the chair before him.

He is an interesting man, gentle and immensely courteous and considerate of others. Tall and bulky, he has a kindly face with temporarily plump pink cheeks showing few wrinkles for a man who happily admits that he is 54.

Since February, when he arrived back in England, he has put on two stone and is disgusted with himself.

"I don't need all this fat," he frowns. "I feel awful, but when I'm under stress I eat a lot. We have been working terribly hard and at speed and I find food a compensatory comfort."

"I get tense and I eat lots



"Go and tell dad Auntie Florrie's pup has just created a little work of art in the hall."

SNUG AND SAFE FROM THE STORM

Thurlow Craig/Up Country



THE WEATHER forecasters had told us to get ready for torrential rain and high winds up to Gale Force Nine on high ground which meant us.

So that night I made all safe and sound, including bolting Patchy, my wife's saddle-horse, and his companion, our little donkey Rebecca, safely away with a good feed for the night, in the larger loosebox.

By midnight we knew we were in for it and half an hour later had the first signs. A gale whipped itself up in the space of minutes and the front door (due to be bolted top and bottom before we went up to bed) flew open with a crash. It took both my wife and I to get it shut and bolted.

One anxiety remained, but this might only happen if the gale turned north. At that end of the house there is a crooked line of five big ash trees. I'd say at least 100 years old.

The thing is, they were all pollarded many years ago and sometimes pollarded trees go rotten in the middle of the trunks, thereby weakening them. And as the nearest one is only four yards from the

end of the house it would demolish that part of it which happens to be the end loosebox, now containing five or six tons of hardwood logs.

Noise

So we went to bed, but the noise of the storm, wind howling and whining under eaves and round corners, occasional gusty increases of the gale, and rain beating with the sound of drums on the roof and against the windows, kept us long awake.

Eventually we got to sleep but it was broken several times before daylight came. Then I went down to get the day started and Puss (the half-Persian she-cat) got on to the window sill and asked for out, as she always does. It was still blowing a gale

and raining torrents. The house was so dark that the lamps had to be lit — and it was cold, too.

When I went back to the kitchen the other three cats went into the living room, the kittens going to the window and asking for out. As for Cleo the Siamese, for a moment she stood upright on her hindlegs in the middle of the room to see out of the window without having to bother getting up on to the sill.

Then, with an air of disgust, she jumped up on to the hall-plate on the old-fashioned stove, curling up there until I lit the fire an hour later. No for her was this kind of weather.

After five minutes both kittens jumped up on the outside sill and demanded to be let in. They were soaking and

impounded Gretchen's place in front of the dead fire. Ten minutes later Fluff, with a dead half-grown rat in her mouth, likewise requested entry and in she came, giving herself a huge shake and scattering rain all over the place.

The rat she turned over to the kittens, putting it in the far corner of the room, and then took over their place in front of the dead fire misawing loudly to me to get a blaze going at once.

Which I did, thinking over what I had known for years. When one of our domestic pussies kills anything at all large or fierce, there is no nonsense about playing with it. It gets killed immediately before getting a chance to damage the cat, or escape.

The playing with mice and small birds serves, I believe, two purposes. First, it educates the kittens to have quick reflexes, while as far as adult household cats are concerned, it keeps them more or less in training.

Meanwhile, the gale and rain continued to roar and drum around this stout little house that has withstood such assaults for over two and a half centuries, without shivering and without losing more than a slate or two.

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