

CHAPTER 12

Running Away

“He was a bitter man born out of frustration.”
Julia Goodman on Ian Hendry.

“To eat the fruit of the lotus is to lose the desire to return home. But everyone who does has a reason.” So ran the blurb in *Radio Times* for the BBC’s new “sunny place for shady people” serial in Crete.

Writer Michael J Bird, then a relatively unknown quantity, had penned *The Lotus Eaters* with Ian in mind. Ian’s unconventional bar and boat lifestyle made him ideally suited for the part of Erik Shepherd, an expatriate in Crete trapped in a tempestuous marriage.

Bird then added some dimensions to ensure that both husband and wife were suitably “tormented”, providing plenty of material for melodramatic, anguished looks into the camera. Erik had fled England after being charged with the murder of a child; Ann was a “sleeper” agent with British intelligence. Surround them with a group of eccentric Brits, all with their own “skeletons”, and you had plenty of scope for recriminations. Bird was convinced that the format would be a hit with viewers. Such a show would be even more popular, Bird reasoned, if it could be filmed on location and if a big star took the lead. *The Lotus Eaters*, which had an impressive budget of £250,000, would be one of the most ambitious BBC series to date.



Writer Michael J Bird works on the script for the first series of *The Lotus Eaters* in 1971 while Ian watches. The photo, signed by Ian, says “with reference to a naughty remark”.

This was taken at Ian’s home (Photo: courtesy Olive Bird)

Tony Read, Ian’s pal from the Central School of Speech and Drama 18 years before, was now a senior producer at the BBC. Read had spent seven years making *The Troubleshooters*, a popular series nearing its end. Then he was offered a proposal for a group of expats living on Majorca, provisionally entitled *The Lotus Eaters*. Read agreed that the idea and the proposed pilot episode were excellent. But first – and before the lead actor was even

considered – there was a wrangle over the setting. Read felt that Majorca would be the wrong location:

The schedule meant we would be filming in November when it rains there and is generally a bit dreary, weatherwise. So I began looking elsewhere. I hit upon the idea of a Greek island, thinking of all the special light in Greece and all that bouzouki music.

Bird, however, still had his heart set on Spain and even considered Tenerife. Many locations were mooted, including Ibiza and Malta. Only a joint recce by Bird and Read to Crete in May 1971 changed Bird's mind. Bird told *Radio Times* that they had taken a taxi along the coast towards Aghios Nikolaos:

As we turned the corner round a narrow headland, my heart lurched. In front of me was a town which exactly matched, in every detail, the town I had described in my script. There was a shot in the script of a high-level view of the town. It was as if I had written it from where I was standing. When we went down into the town, it was almost no surprise to discover there was a bar with a pepper tree outside, exactly like Shepherd's Bar in my script.

So Crete it was.

The Lotus Eaters had done the rounds of both ITV and BBC and had been seriously considered by Granada and London Weekend. Despite Bird's intentions, Ian was never guaranteed the part. Writers often imagine a particular actor in a role but – as we have seen – that did not make it a shoo-in for Ian at all. Ian's connection to Read worked in his favour but against that was his reputation as a hard drinker. Read had his doubts:

Previous experience with heavy-drinking actors left me with all sorts of dire doubts. However, out of friendship I agreed to meet him and discuss it. We had lunch together, just the two of us, in Golders Green. It went very well. It was great being with him again, and he drank

abstemiously, admitting that he had had a drink problem but promising me it was now under control, that he was having treatment and was 'off the hard stuff for good'. At the end of the meal I accepted his promises to behave and told him the part was his. Delighted, he suggested we had coffee back at his house. We were in separate cars, so he said he would see me there. Oh, and would I mind stopping off on the way and picking up a bottle of brandy?

Read was appalled.

I suppose I should have called the whole thing off at that point, but I thought that I would be able to keep Ian under at least some control, if only because of our personal relationship, and I believed he would be so good in the part that it would be worth it as, indeed, it was in the end, more or less.

The incident with Read, claiming to be off “the hard stuff” one minute, ordering spirits the next, illustrated one of Ian’s recurring quirks – his reluctance to conceal his boozing. Granted, not all alcoholics feel compelled to resort to hanging bottles outside windows – like Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend* – but Ian could have shunned the brandy for at least that afternoon. Ian’s brazenness was always strange. Maybe he genuinely thought he could control it. Or perhaps he reckoned on people taking a gamble on him (as Read did) because he was such a talented actor. Such was his behaviour for the rest of his life. First, the promise not to drink excessively, or the claim that he now had “the problem” under control, followed by a bender proving the opposite. You could call it alcoholic self-delusion. Or perhaps it was simply that Ian could never dissemble. At 11am he might tell you that he had controlled his drinking. And he might have really believed it when he said it. But, at 11.30am, he could be downing a triple brandy – if he felt like it. For Ian, having a snifter was as normal as a cup of tea for other people.

Perhaps Ian also had a tendency to be too open with journalists about his weaknesses, in particular his love of the bottle. In 1972, Douglas Marlborough once asked if he wasn’t just a bit

TOO honest. “Yes, part of me thinks it’s a bad thing,” Ian replied. “But if you’re constantly asked personal questions, particularly when you’ve led a slightly tempestuous life, as far as I’m concerned, you either have to say ‘piss off’ or answer them,” he said.

Over the years many allowances were made for Ian’s drink problem. Scripts were given last-minute adjustments to illustrate the character’s penchant for boozing. Watch Ian’s appearances in the 1970s and you will notice that a brandy glass was never far away. So Ian was lucky to have a good friend in Read who trusted that Ian’s artistic conscience, and his innate brilliance as an actor, would outweigh the risks. Otherwise, Ian might not have starred in *The Lotus Eaters* at all.

Ironically, the character of Erik Shepherd was a recovering alcoholic. Ian, however, did not comment on this. He would deal with his “problem” as and when he deemed fit. But that time was not now and, ultimately, would never arrive. One is reminded of the old adage about Jeffrey Bernard, that “starting from tomorrow, it’s all going to be different”. When Ian flew to Crete in November 1971 he had been evicted from the family home and had “lost” his wife and two children. It was not the time to quit the sauce.

Away from the mess of his personal life, Ian was enthusiastic about the series. “I knew he (Bird) had derived the idea from part of my personality, part of my past and possibly, part of my talent,” Ian reflected in 1980. “It did seem a desirable way of life shooting in idyllic Crete. The whole team were such happy exiles.” In 1983, Ian offered a further reflection to *TV Times*. “His life was a bit like my fantasy: running a bar, a restaurant and a marina somewhere in the sun,” he said.

Originally, Janet was to have played his wife, Ann. At least that was Ian and Janet’s assumption in frequent statements throughout 1971. *The Times*’ obituary of Ian said that the part was Janet’s and that their divorce had “threatened the entire venture when she withdrew from the role”. In fact, it seems that Ian had merely SUGGESTED Janet play his wife. Janet had been amenable until their relationship had irretrievably broken down.

Tony Read, however, confirms that the part of Ann was never Janet’s, at least not formally. “As far as I was concerned, Janet was

never considered for the part, but of course she may well have been under consideration by the previous companies,” Read told me. Janet

might have assumed that she would be offered the part. She had even told *TV Times* back in October 1970 that “we’re looking forward to working together again on a new series next year which will be called – believe it or not – *The Lotus Eaters*”. But this was premature.

The impending divorce scuppered any possibility of Janet taking the role. Six weeks before the series was due to go into production, the part of Ann had still not been cast. Read consulted the series’ three directors – Cyril Coke, David Cunliffe and Douglas Camfield. They suggested Wanda Ventham, then 36, best known for the Gerry Anderson TV series *UFO*. She was highly talented, had attended Central with Ian, and had worked with him before in *The Gold Robbers* in 1969. The chemistry between Wanda and Ian was good, they respected each other and they became good friends. Wanda was, and still is, a doughty defender of Ian. Despite the ups and downs of working with him, she never regretted the collaboration.



The marriage of Erik and Ann Shepherd (Ian and Wanda Ventham) is shown here in this screen capture of a flashback sequence in *The Lotus Eaters*. (Photo: courtesy Olive Bird)

Another issue still had to be overcome. Producers wanted to shoot on location, in Crete itself, but the union, the left-wing Association of Cinematograph, Television & Allied Technicians, said it would black production if filming went ahead on Crete. The union had banned filming on Greece as a protest against the rightwing colonels' regime. The BBC, however, expressed confidence that it could film on Crete nonetheless, releasing a statement pressing its right to undertake location shooting anywhere. "We cannot be influenced by political considerations." In the end, the corporation overcame the problem by using a BBC staff cameraman and other BBC staff personnel.

The Lotus Eaters' first series ran to nine episodes. The account of the Shepherd's stormy marriage was interwoven with stories of the locals. There was Major Woolley, a stuffy, failed army officer (Thorley Walters) with a subservient wife (Sylvia Coleridge) – the quintessential upper-class Brits, sipping Earl Grey, scanning *The Times'* obituaries and ruing Britain's descent into "anarchy". Julia Goodman and Martin Howells played Kirsten and Mark – the young hippies abroad – and Karl Held and Carol Cleveland were the malevolent Mervish siblings. Then there was incorrigible Nestor Turton, brilliantly played by Maurice Denham, a drunken layabout, whore chaser and failed artist with a penchant for scrounging and pinching young ladies' bottoms.

If some of the characterisations and situations – indeed also the acting and dialogue – now seem laboured and staged, even clichéd, we must remember that it was four decades ago. Television drama has changed almost as much as the town of Aghios Nikolaos itself. Filming preceded the package holiday bonanza. Nevertheless, despite its undeniably dated feel, the series accurately pinned down certain "types" on places like the Costa del Sol, the Algarve, Majorca and Crete 40 years ago.

Some of the episodes were very impressive, albeit tragic in content. Bird implied that most of his protagonists had wasted their lives. Was that why they were on Crete? The answer seemed to be yes. Their stories were milked for all they were worth.

Just as the characters had their crises, so did the stars. Many actors enjoyed working with Ian, noting his warmth, generosity, patience and helpfulness, but they only spent a few weeks, at most, alongside him. The extensive on-location filming, followed by studio recording in London, afforded his colleagues a revealing insight into Ian Hendry, the actor and the man. In addition, *The Lotus Eaters*' cast and crew were together out of hours.

Wanda recalls how the trip to Crete started in typical Hendry style – the pratfalls, the showing off:

On our first trip to Crete from Athens to Heraklion, we were delayed. In fact, we set off but we were sent back; we couldn't land because of local thunderstorms. Ian kept us entertained at Athens airport for three hours. It was a one-man show and that's when his clowning came in handy.

With fellow actors watching – Wanda, Maurice Denham, James Kerry and Cyd Hayman – and to the astonishment of nearby Greek air crew, Ian performed one of his favourite routines, his impersonation of a one-legged golfer. It involves an elaborate build-up lasting several minutes and ends with a spectacular pratfall and Ian landing on his face. Ian did this gag countless times in the pubs of Hampstead and Golders Green, as well as on his *This Is Your Life* and even at a Variety Club dinner at the Savoy Hotel in 1981. Sometimes, however, it was just inappropriate.

An example of “wrong time, wrong place” was Ian's display at a reception by the governor of Heraklion. Dave Rice, in his biography of Michael J Bird, wrote that the audience was not amused when Ian did his golfing routine and then appeared to mock the proceedings:

A video screen was relating film of the head of the military junta. The rest of the team were horrified when Hendry sauntered over, pointed to the man and said 'he's a barrel of laughs, isn't he?' Bird was relieved when one of the officials whispered in an aside, 'he is a very amusing fellow, Mr Hendry'.

Wanda – as his screen wife – had most scenes with Ian. Although Ian was reeling from his divorce, she refused to mollycoddle him. She knew her own limitations. Unlike Ian, she could not function properly after a hard night's drinking and five hours' sleep. This is her account on the DVD commentary accompanying the series:

The first assistant would come knocking on my door at 1am and 2am, saying 'can you get him out of the bar, you're the only person he won't thump?' I said 'no, I'm not here to be his emotional crutch. He'll act his socks off you at 8am and I'll be a washout.' And it was absolutely true. He'd get up in the morning and act you off the screen. It was absolutely extraordinary. It had no effect on him at all.

She also commented on the irony of Ian, who really was an alcoholic, playing one.

In contemporary interviews, given while Ian was still alive, Wanda was more circumspect: "I'm suspicious of an actor who doesn't like to drink with his fellow actors. I know it worries a lot of people but he has a magic whether he drinks or not."

Communal dinners in Aghios Nikolaos were usually raucous affairs as Ian held court, sometimes causing a little friction with the crew. Julia Goodman remembers that she and Wanda had to sit on Ian one evening to calm him down. Wanda denies this, robbing me of one of my best lines, namely that if the price of getting drunk was to be sat on by Wanda Ventham and Julia Goodman, then that was a price well worth paying!

Regardless of how much he had consumed the night before, Ian was rarely troubled by hangovers. He once acknowledged that this was "a pity because it could be a good warning". This was dangerous for other actors. Julia Goodman tried to keep up with Ian one night and blacked out. She could not even get out of bed next day. The damage to Ian, at least superficially, was negligible. Tony Read recalls only that the make-up supervisor sometimes had to apply drops in his eyes in the early morning to get them open.

Although he was depressed, Ian's acting was as brilliant as usual. Perhaps the sole exception on the first series occurred back

at the London studios when veteran director Cyril Coke berated Ian in front of the cast and crew for being “out of it” with drink. Wanda regretted Coke’s outburst, believing that it belittled Ian.

Opinions vary about how much Ian was drinking during the day. Wanda and Olive Bird (Michael’s widow) believe Ian largely confined his boozing to after 6pm on the first series. Julia Goodman, admittedly just 20 at the time, swears that Ian was already at the Metaxa in the mornings. She said she could smell it on his breath.

In spite of his demons, Ian was still the alpha male on the first series. Wanda recalled Ian’s helpfulness in a contemporary interview shortly after *The Lotus Eaters* aired:

We did a lot of location work in a boat. Sometimes the seas were a little rough but you always felt that Ian was in control. Even inside the studio he was always looking after me. I’d get carried away when I was doing a scene and forget to find my light. I’d feel a firm hand on my arm, shoving me to a spot where the camera and lighting were more advantageous to me. Afterwards, before leaving the set, he’d always be sure to ask how the scene went for me.

Julia detected a darker edge to Ian, a resentment towards a business that he felt had let him down. It would come out during filming but also on subsequent encounters with Ian in Hampstead pubs:

He got angry because he’d been badly treated by the public in a way and the film industry because his talent wasn’t recognised. All the adulation went to the Burtons, the Harrises and the O’Tooles because of their flamboyance. But he had the real talent. It was sometimes hard for people to love and like him because of his anger. That’s what came out with the drink. He was a bitter man born out of frustration but the kind of real actor passionate about his craft that it was a privilege to work with.

Ian, said Julia, was “intense, very focused and took his work extremely seriously” – he seldom fluffed a line – but she believed he was “underrated because of his behavioural difficulties that prevented him expressing his talent”.

Julia also sensed that Ian suffered from “low self-esteem”, although perhaps this related more to personal issues than his career. Sometimes she would give him a comforting cuddle. She saw Ian in all kinds of moods, depressed, sullen, raucous and – more memorably perhaps – angry. Tempers flared in the hotel lobby in Aghios Nikolaos when Ian attempted one of his acrobatic tricks. Carol Cleveland – best known as one of the stars of *Monty Python* – berated him for being “pissed”. Ian told her to shut up. But she repeated it. A furious Ian then slapped her across the face. Wanda Ventham, who was not there at the time but admitted finding Cleveland “a rather irritating woman”, thinks that Cleveland should have kept quiet. As the company’s lead actor, Ian was entitled to respect. Julia found that “Ian liked to challenge you as a woman”. Yet he could also be sentimental. At the end of the first series he presented her with a beautiful poem.

Although Ian in no way scoffed at the material, Julia feels that Ian was still “punching below his weight” on *The Lotus Eaters*. Tony Read agrees and believes that, in a way, Ian had too much of a facility. “Hence our drama school joke that he would be the great commercial star rather than the great classical actor.”

The first episode, after a rather silly start involving an eternally “difficult” German tourist – an old plot device designed to engender sympathy for our True Brit leading man – quickly picks up steam. Ian did one of his best scenes with Cyd Hayman (playing Ruth) on a boat when they search for her long-lost brother. Erik tells her about the extraordinary characteristics of dolphins. He relates how he once saw an injured male dolphin brought to the surface – so that he could take in air – and nursed back to life by a female.

“Your dolphin was lucky,” says Ruth.

“Wasn’t he though?” says Erik.

It is Ian at his best, the delivery natural and unforced with enough suppressed emotion to imply that he drew parallels with himself. Erik Shepherd, indeed Ian Hendry at this point in his life,

had no one to bring him to the surface. He was lonely on location and occasionally morose. He rarely mentioned Janet – at least to strangers – but when he did so it was poignant. “The saddest thing of all is I still love her,” Ian told Bob Smyth who profiled the series for *Radio Times*.

Watch Ian in *The Lotus Eaters* and it is tempting not just to see Erik Shepherd, trapped in a loveless marriage, but Ian Hendry, twice divorced, an embittered alcoholic. But whereas Shepherd – as written – was a recovering alcoholic, someone who knew that just one drop of liquor could spell destruction, Ian was still the unrepentant boozier far from his limit.

No one on *The Lotus Eaters* set spoke to Ian about his drinking. Forty years ago, deep-rooted problems were seldom discussed. The era of counselling – Betty Ford, tough love, hanging “dirty laundry” out, admission of loss of control – was some way off. “Rehab” was not yet fashionable. Yet Tony Read was aware of Ian’s health issues. Back in London, Ian was dispatched to the BBC medical surgery for regular vitamin b12 injections. He also spent time at Henlow Grange health farm in Bedfordshire. Nobody admitted that Ian was “drying out” during these stays; they were billed as a “rest” for Ian after a busy and stressful time. A piece of nonsense in one glossy magazine showed Ian receiving a cucumber moisturiser eyepad treatment, taking a steam bath and enjoying the country air.

Yet, somehow, Ian was never going to be an advert for healthy living. And, in Crete, he had little incentive to get sober. In January 1972, just as Ian was filming on the island of Spinalonga, the former leper colony off the undeveloped village of Elounda, Janet had a serious car accident. Janet had been filming a series called *Adam Smith* in Scotland. Ironically – you could not make it up – she had been playing the part of a woman dousing a broken marriage in drink. (*Adam Smith* was Janet’s final acting role. Screen captures show her to be gaunt and lined and looking older than her 37 years.)

During filming Janet complained of stomach pains. A Scottish doctor thought it might be an ulcer and told her to see her London doctor for a scan. She had to avoid eating for 10 hours. She was almost at her own doctor’s home when she blacked out, crashing

into the back of a parked car. Janet, who was not wearing a seat belt, went through the windscreen. Sally, then just seven, was in the back of the car and suffered only minor injuries.

TV Times carried Janet's own account of the accident in its April 1972 issue:

As I came to, Sally was screaming, but I couldn't see her. I didn't see her for four days. 'Where are we? I asked. She said: 'at the side of the road' and I told her not to get out of the car. Within seconds people were there. A man helped me into the surgery, I remember, and Sally must have been with me because I heard the doctor say: 'Hello, Sally, what are you doing here all by yourself?' Sally said she was with me, and he said: 'Good God, Mrs Hendry. It's you.' That's how bad I looked to my own doctor.

Janet was left blind for four days with 130 stitches required to close the wounds.

According to Tony Read, Ian coped manfully and took charge from afar as best he could. Julia Goodman recalls that Ian, usually talkative, fell silent for the rest of the day. Filming continued next morning when it was established that Janet was out of danger.

Janet might have been a thousand miles away from Ian but elements of *The Lotus Eaters* echoed the tempestuousness of their marriage: flashbacks to drunken scenes, domestic altercations and the lure of other lovers. Ann tests Erik's resolve not to drink by pouring him a glass of wine. Erik resists but knows the temptation is always present. Ian must have marvelled at the irony.

The best episode, however, did not revolve around the Shepherds but the Woolleys. Major Woolley, whose life consists of rituals strictly observed, fails to get his regular package of indispensable goodies from England – marmalade, digestives and cheddar. His relationship with his wife gradually unravels. The loss of the parcel severs their link to England – *A Touch of Home* as the episode is called – that ultimately unhinges them. Woolley drinks himself into oblivion in Shepherd's Bar, becoming more and more paranoid. The denouement is horrific. Mrs Woolley, hallucinating about tarantulas, beats her husband to death when she thinks one of the beasts is crawling on his face. Such drama in Lotus land!

Once again in *The Lotus Eaters*, Ian showed himself to be the consummate TV actor. Ian always said: “Think it through and it will show on screen”, and it does. There are moments of great acting with few words. When Ian stumbles on the washed-up body of a drunken partygoer, played by Suzan Farmer, an extended close-up reveals his face creased with worry. Erik Shepherd is the “paterfamilias” of Crete, shown when he rescues Kirsten and Mark from their imprisonment on Spinalonga in the episode *A Fascinating Couple*.

If at times Ian’s portrayal seems over-official – almost militaristic in its stiff upper lip – that was the fashion of the times. Few bar-owners speak with the refinement of Erik and Ann Shepherd either but that was BBC drama 40 years ago.

Overall, Read was happy with Ian’s performance. His gamble had paid off. He recalled:

He was generally professional, although I had to instruct the floor assistants in the studio not to fetch him brandies from the BBC Club, but to bring the money straight to me when he gave it to them. On the whole, though, he was no more ‘difficult’ than many other leading actors.

Rumours that Ian had become a pain to work with are belied by the friendships he formed. Not only Wanda Ventham but also Maurice Denham whose bearded old pisshead Nestor was like the character Ian would play 12 years later in *Brookside*. Denham, jokingly referred to as “dad” by Ian, was a frequent golfing partner of Ian’s later years.

The series, screened on BBC2 on April 23, 1972, proved highly popular. Inevitably, perhaps, some critics carped. Here is James Thomas in the *Daily Express*:

*It is not difficult to imagine the glee felt by BBC programme planners when Michael J Bird dreamed up **The Lotus Eaters**. Set as it is in Crete – think of all that sunshine and sea on the colour telly. Think of those glaring white villages soon no doubt to be ruined by tourists after last night and the excuses to be found for wandering over the hills and down deserted narrow*

streets. Let's hope that the series decides to be more of a play than a travelogue.

Perhaps the first episode was a bit slow but it soon spiked up and the series became compulsive viewing on Sunday nights during its nine-week run.

By April, Ian had already returned to London. Leading roles in a couple of films awaited him. But they were to be his last. The devil on his shoulder – like an ever-present opponent in the boxing ring – was landing some effective punches. Ian's days as a leading man were numbered.