

'My battle to save TV's Sherlock Holmes from madness'

By KATE MOLLOY

THE WOMAN who has nursed Sherlock Holmes star Jeremy Brett through years of dark depression told last night how his TV role drove him to a complete breakdown.

Brett, who has never recovered from the death of his wife in 1985, was admitted to hospital two weeks ago.

And Linda Pritchard, the woman in his life for the past five years, says his gruelling performances as the TV detective were partly to blame.

Today Brett, 56, is still in Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, struggling to overcome the manic depression that has ravaged his life.

Linda, who virtually had to force him there, is distraught at the thought of the painful treatment he is suffering.

Severe

She explained yesterday how the dark side of the character Brett has portrayed for 11 years deeply affected his own troubled mind.

He has had severe depression since his second wife Joan died of cancer nearly nine years ago. In recent years his behaviour has been disturbingly similar to that of Holmes, a depressive addicted to opium.

Like Holmes, Brett has lain in the dark for days refusing to speak, but has also experienced manic, euphoric highs.

'Jeremy is like a sponge,' said Linda, 40, at her semi-detached house in West London. 'He totally absorbs his character.'

And, despite his illness, it is something Brett has slowly recognised himself. He has decided not to play Holmes any more.

'Even the crew were concerned that it was taking Jeremy over,' she said. 'One took him aside and warned him, "Play the part — don't become it".'

Brett's illness reached crisis point two weeks ago. Unable to contact him for three days, Linda drove to his South London home.

'He was just pacing the room,' she recalled. 'Talking incessantly



DEVOTED: Linda Pritchard with Jeremy Brett



TRAGIC: Joan Brett

into thin air. His pupils were dilated and there seemed to be no one behind his eyes.'

He acknowledged her when she arrived, but it was clear that he thought she was a stranger. 'He looked like Jeremy. But it was as if he was possessed. I knew he was very, very ill.'

'He was talking to people who weren't there. He said he was trying to communicate with the dead. That's when I decided enough was enough. I just had to get him to hospital.'

Sponsor

It took her three hours to persuade him to go. When they eventually reached the hospital steps, they clung together and cried — she with guilt that she

had brought him, he in confusion and fear.

'He was angry and resentful because I had taken him there,' she said yesterday, the anguish etched in her drawn features.

'It was his illness that was making him blame me. It wasn't the man I know and love.'

Divorcee Linda, who once worked as a bus driver, visits Brett every day. And when he is discharged, she intends to be at his side.

Her decision to talk so frankly about Brett's condition was made in full consultation with him. He hopes, through her words, that the myths and stigmas that surround mental illness will be dispelled.

Their relationship began when she wrote to ask the actor, then starring as Holmes in the West

DARK: Brett as Sherlock Holmes

End, to sponsor her on a six-month run around Britain for cancer research.

'He invited me backstage and when I met him I felt I had known him all my life. We became immediate friends and he gave me £3,000 of his own money to sponsor me on my run.'

She added: 'I can never be, nor would ever want to be, a replacement for Joan. She was an amazing lady and they were so in love.'

'Jeremy truly believed she would recover. The anger he felt when she didn't was just immense.'

Brett, who spent two months in a psychiatric hospital after Joan's death, was eventually prescribed lithium, a strong mood stabiliser. 'The drug kept Jeremy on an even keel. It seemed the perfect answer,' said Linda.

But late last year he suffered serious heart problems.

'For the last series of Holmes he spent most of his time in a wheelchair,' said Linda.

The heart condition meant he had to be admitted to hospital, where doctors stopped the lithium. His mental illness was to return. 'Whatever pushes him is absolutely incredible,' she said. 'Most people would keel over and give up — and I wouldn't blame them.'

Doctors are now trying to find a drug that will control Brett's mood but not affect his heart.

Return

'I pray they will find a suitable drug soon,' said Linda. 'Jeremy is much improved, but he will stay in hospital for at least another fortnight.'

'Mental illness is not something to be embarrassed about and Jeremy never has been. I know he wants it to be recognised as just another illness.'

'The first time Jeremy got ill it frightened me, I didn't understand it.'

'Now that I do, I will always be there for him.'

It's just another illness, says star