

Charles Bronson's resume is short on romantic leading men roles but away from the screen that made him a worldwide hero he's been that and much, much more. Even today, his life crippled by the confusion and medically inexplicable hurdle of Alzheimer's, his tender legacy persists.

The tough, taciturn individuality which made him a multi-millionaire and a Hollywood box office superstar always suggested Bronson was chiselled rather than born. He may never have had poetic lines but he had the look.

'Audiences like to see the bad guys get their comeuppance,' is how he explained his breathless popularity over more than three decades. He never saw the need to expand on the motivation. Or, publicly, say too much.

For, yes, he had that look, the icemaker eyes and the rather absurd wrap-around moustache, which at the height of his legend in Europe had him nicknamed 'Il Brutto', The Animal. Bronson was a memory of the Bogart era of Hollywood, of the days of persona, when all leading men didn't appear to live in 'Dawson's Creek.'

Yet, he played his most emotive role away from view -- a tale of courage and charm and tremendous strength and resilience but more than anything else a love story. 'Charlie may look homicidal, but in reality he's all heart,' says his friend the former Hollywood producer Peter Bart, adding: 'Charlie's dirty secret is that he has always been an emotional, caring man, a sweetheart.'

It was strength he needed most when his British-born wife, the actress Jill Ireland, was stricken by cancer. Until then, life had been good to them, a happy, golden couple with children, homes in Malibu and Bel Air, a horse ranch at the end of a dirt road a sharp turn past CeCe's Tavern in West Windsor, Vermont.

The disease which spread through the onetime English starlet's body also seemed to infect other areas of their lives; there were other pressures the most of which was the heroin addiction of her adopted son Jason. Jill Ireland called her husband 'Charlie' or, when he was being his most stoic, just 'Bronson'. It was always impossible to imagine her fighting for her life without him at her side. In his way, he regarded his wife's cancer as 'The Problem.' He was frustrated by it, angry at it.

Not long before her death in 1990, Jill Ireland expressed to me Bronson's understandable aggravation: 'Charlie can't just whip out a machine gun and mow down the cancer cells.'

'Charlie had always been able to protect me and the family from everything. This was something he couldn't do anything about. I think that was very hard on him.'

Some men run away from illness. Women too but not so often. It's a combination of fear and confusion, of being in a corner. Bronson stayed his corner. He was there at the start of every day and in the night when he poured chilled, bottled water for his or wiped her brow. In the later days, he would carry the cannisters of chemicals needed for her treatment through the cancer wards of Californian and Texan hospitals. He talked, reluctantly but quite extensively for him, about his feelings at that time: 'When you love someone you feel their pain. It's why some husbands go through morning sickness when their wives are pregnant. But to ever talk about it is difficult. I wouldn't tell Jill how I felt. I behaved in such a way that was opposite to how I felt. I must have seemed strong to her. I didn't want to bring her down. It was like keeping the stiff upper lip, of being British about it. Of course, she understood that.'

'The fear really hits you. That's what you feel first. And then it's the anger and frustration. Part of the problem is how little we understand about the ultimate betrayal of the body when it rebels against itself. You always worry about charlatans. We found that specialists did not know as much as we thought. So, you think maybe there are other answers. There are not but if you believe something will help you it probably will: it will help, not cure.'

'What kind of man would I have been if I had not been there to help her? I felt along with her -- not the physical pain, of course, but all her mental anguish. You can't be detached. She needed to have someone who understood what was happening in her mind. That was what I was for.'

Their marriage had been as durable as the classic World War Two film, 'The Great Escape'. Bronson and Jill Ireland's first husband David McCallum played a tunnel team in the 1963 POW escape movie. Bronson had been married for sixteen years to Harriet Tendler and McCallum -- 'the Farrah Fawcett of the 'Sixties' he called himself after his astonishing success in 'The Man From U.N.C.L.E.' television series -- and Ireland for five. Years later, McCallum told me of the day Bronson came up to him on the set of the film and told him: 'Be careful, or I'll steal her from you.' The British actor added: 'He meant it -- and he did.'

The British couple had two sons ( they adopted Jason after she miscarried in a German hotel room during the making of 'The Great Escape') and Bronson had a son and daughter. Other mates, other children, but Bronson and Ireland connected as though moonstruck. Jill Ireland had recalled for me: 'At the time I was convinced that nothing would come of the warm friendship which sprang up so spontaneously between us. But we discovered we had the same dilemma -- we were both married to partners from who we were drifting apart. And, as confused as I was, I knew one thing for sure -- I must, at all cost, maintain contact with Charles Bronson.'

'I found him quite unique. We had a great physical attraction. His presence. Englishmen don't walk like that. And he doesn't talk very much. He's a real loner.'

Indeed, it was an unlikely match. She was the oldest of two children and was raised in London. Her father Jack was the manager of several grocery shops and her mother Jean was a dance and music teacher. Toddler Jill was, at four, in ballet school. At 12, she was at a professional dance school. At 18, she dance sold in the film 'Oh, Rosalinda', and that performance got her a contract with Rank where she met David McCallum: 'I kind of even got whooshed into getting married. I did love David but we were too young and I don't know how he managed to be married to me for so long.'

Bronson was, literally, from another world. He was born Charles Buchinsky, the seventh son and ninth child of fifteen of a Lithuanian-Russian coal miner in Pennsylvania. At 14, his father, who had deserted from the Tsar's Army in Russia and whom he was named after, died from cancer. It was the middle of The Depression. Two years later he went down the mines, working eighteen hour days; although he had to steal to live -- he served a short prison term for theft -- he stayed there for five years. From underground he went up in the air as a tail gunner in a B-29 in the Air Corps flying a couple of missions before being wounded, getting hit by a bullet in the left arm.

After the war, he panhandled his way across America taking what jobs he could. Then, he was told actors made good money and he decided: 'What's so tough about acting -- I can do that.' Many never thought he could but he was right for he became a star. From humble beginnings. He tried his luck at acting at California's Pasadena Playhouse. In 1951, he got his first film role in 'You're in the Navy Now.' Another war veteran, Lee Marvin, also made an appearance. Although Bronson worked with many names, Alan Ladd, Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor Gary Cooper, Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn and Vincent Price, he stayed way under the titles. But he was always persistent.

He began to do bigger parts in smaller movies and then began to attract significant attention in 'The Magnificent Seven', 'The Dirty Dozen' and, of course, 'The Great Escape'. The grand Italian director Sergio Leone made him, as with Clint Eastwood in his spaghetti Westerns, a living legend with 'Once Upon a Time in the West'.

By the first 'Death Wish' film in 1974, for British director and Bronson's friend, Michael Winner, he was the strong, silent man of the movies and the biggest box office star in the world.

She had given birth to sons Paul (now 42), Valentine (now 38), and adopted Jason (who was 27 when he died in 1989,) when she met Bronson who had a son Tony( now 41) and daughter Suzanne( now 46).

Bronson was 42, she was 26 but arithmetic didn't have anything to do with it. Bronson divorced actress Harriet Tandler in 1965 and the McCallums' marriage ended twelve months

later. It was a strange ménage; Bronson and David McCallum were still great friends, Bronson and Jill Ireland were madly in love.

They were married on October 5, 1968. Between them they had custody of five children -- his two, her three. Their own daughter Zuleika -- the Vermont ranch and Malibu stables were named after her -- was born in 1972.

They also had another 'secret' daughter, Katrina Holden Bronson who is now a 28-year-old film director. She won the 'Emerging Director Award' at the 2001 Malibu Film Festival for her short movie 'Righteous Indignation'. Bronson, who turned eight-two-years-old earlier this year, was at the ceremony. There were tears in his eyes but even then, in March, 2001, the virile, action man of the movies had clearly been slowed down by Alzheimer's. Bronson's friends say he was composed enough to fight against that lottery of a disease but, like Jill Ireland's cancer, there was never going to be a victory for him. The irony for the always super fit Bronson was that he had never suffered a day's illness in his life. The last photograph of him showed him -- although instantly recognisable -- as a tragically confused figure in declining health.

But in his extraordinary love story, in the summer of 2003 he has his family around him including Katrina. Bronson adopted her when she was eleven-years-old. Her mother, Hilary Holden, a British casting director and single mother, was a long time friend of Jill Ireland's. When she died suddenly in 1981 from a heart attack and Katrina was orphaned there was concern for her. Her mother had few close friends; there were no relatives. Bronson already had a brood of children but after her mother's funeral it was into Bronson's black, stretch limousine that she climbed. She instantly became emotionally as well as legally one of the family.

'Charlie and Jill provided a warm home for Katrina but it was not an easy road for any of the,' said Peter Bart.

Jill Ireland's cancer ordeal began in May, 1984. She had visited the doctor for a routine breast examination which turned into a regimen of tests and within forty eight hours the verdict of malignant cancer in her right breast and a mastectomy. What sounds trite in a paragraph, for her and her family, and families like them, then and now, produces a whole new vision of life. Or, rather, the threat of losing it. Jill Ireland was very open about that day:

'I was wheeled into a room where Charlie was waiting. I asked Charlie point blank: 'Have you soon the doctor?' He said: 'Yes' and there was a look on his face I'd never seen before.

'We have a very straight relationship and we don't lie to each other. 'It's malignant,' he said.'

Hope and horror, in and out of that order, followed each other for the next six years. Bronson stopped work. If he had made a film she could not have been with him. And he would not be apart from her -- before he had insisted she co-star in most of what he did.

Later, he explained much without meaning to: 'I don't have friends, I have thousands of acquaintances. No friends. I figured I had a wife and children. They took up all the personal time I had. My children are my friends. My wife was my friend. We were opposites but I figured it made for a better relationship that way. One of the difficult parts of being a public person married to someone who was seriously ill is that people asked 'So, how's your wife.' I found it difficult. They were strangers.'

Throughout the ordeal, Bronson tried but would have to have been a much better actor than he was, to conceal the hurt.

His wife wrote two books about her battle for life. Five years after the mastectomy, six months of chemotherapy and an almighty stubbornness to live -- 'I've proved I'm from very strong English stock' -- it appeared victory over cancer had been achieved. In the summer of 1989, doctors had given Jill Ireland just a couple of years to live. Even that was a Faustian arrangement -- on condition she kept on with radical and extensive chemotherapy and radiation treatment. The cancer had spread to her lungs, pelvis and lymph nodes. To combat it she had a catheter surgically implanted in her heart. She wore a drug infusion pump with a reservoir she filled -- each day for six days before a three week break -- with the anti-cancer drug adreomychin which slowly dripped into her system. She and Bronson never gave up.

She described to me her fight to survive: 'I spend seven hours a day in the hospital going from one little treatment room to another. Sometimes I'm zonked out on morphine and sitting in a wheelchair and other times I'm walking around with Charlie beside me wheeling this crane with seven pounds (weight) of chemotherapy liquids hanging on it. We all have an image of cancer victims being bald with tubes trailing from their bodies but to think what I'm describing is me always comes as a surprise. '

Yet, it was no surprise when she found the strength and courage to be at the burial of Jason, the son she and Bronson had brought up, who had died from a drug overdose. She didn't cry at the graveside. The effects of the cancer treatment were evident and she was terribly thin at the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in the Hollywood Hills. Paul McCallum gave the eulogy for his brother. Valentine McCallum played a song he had written for his brother. Then, Bronson and David McCallum, the tunnel team from 'The Great Escape' all these years before, carried the casket up the hill to the burial plot.

The following year the two men were at the funeral of the woman they had both loved.

Bronson and his wife had planned the ceremony. She was organised and did try to look ahead. She worried about 'Charlie' and introduced him to Kim Weeks an actress and singer who she had got to like during audio tape recordings of the books she had written about her cancer battles. She and Bronson married four years ago and it is Kim, 41, who was in the most recent photograph of Bronson, the woman with her arm on his, helping him along. It is, like their family, an ongoing legacy of Bronson's love story with Jill Ireland.

He may not have been of Shakespearean status as an actor but Bronson has always been a tough act.

Better to recall that image, than that of Alzheimer's victim. In his quiet dignified way he paraded his Love Story while Jill Ireland was dying. It was at a glittering Hollywood gala in 1989. It was at Universal Studios in Los Angeles and a landslide of celebrities had turned out. It was black tie and the best of New York, Paris, London and Milan were there. It was also Bronson facing down adversity. The Bronsons sat their table. The band played some Glenn Miller and then something soft and slow. Bronson got up. He stood behind his wife's chair and touched her arm. She looked up and smiled and rose into his arms. They danced quietly slowly across the floor, one of those things you steal, a private moment in what was their very public world.

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