



Jeanne Stuart

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13th August 1908 – 12th February 2003

TACT
THE ACTORS' CHARITABLE TRUST

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Jeanne de Rothschild was born Ivy Sweet, in Hampstead in 1908, the youngest of three daughters of a metal-beater. She recalled her father, William James Sweet, as a stern Victorian, and that her mother always retained her Welsh accent throughout her decades in London. Her father never fully supported his daughter's theatrical career, although reportedly boasted widely whenever her name appeared at the local cinemas. Of her older sisters, little is known. The eldest worked in a shop in Hampstead and is believed to have married and had children.

By the age of 12, Ivy had become sufficiently talented as a dancer that she was recruited by a girls' troupe and travelled the country performing. By 15, in 1923, she was appearing on stage as an actress, and with her new name, Jeanne Stuart. Her London stage career was a triumph, with regular work, and a great following for her roles in drawing room comedies and murder mysteries. In the 1930s, appearing in such sell-out productions as *After All* and *It's A Girl*, she was described as, "tall and of a figure that enables her to wear to advantage extremely modern-cut clothes," which, "caused gasps of surprise on the first nights". She regularly played alongside Jack Buchanan, Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert (who went on to live at Denville Hall for several years, where Jeanne visited him before the War). Her first New York appearance was in September 1930 in *Nine Till Six*.

Jeanne Stuart was also recruited to the Actors' Orphanage Fund (now TACT) and attended garden parties and appeared in benefit performances throughout the 1920s and 1930s. She visited the orphanage at Langley Place in 1933 – recalled as a glamorous star.

Jeanne Stuart gained international fame through her films – mainly between 1931 (for example, *Mischief*) and 1939 (including *Old Mother Riley Joins Up*). Korda's 1934 *Forget Me Not* is still studied on film courses and thus available. Through her films, mostly shot in England, she became a lifelong friend of Ralph Richardson and Margaret Lockwood. She became a regular feature in the gossip columns and society pages, with speculation about her suitors – including a certain Jimmie Sainsbury. But the businessman Bernard Docker managed to elicit her (apparently reluctant) acceptance of his suit and they were married in April 1933 at the Prince's Row register office, with guests including the Duke and Duchess of Atholl. They travelled in South America for their honeymoon, and Jeanne was given the famous 860 ton yacht, *Shemara*, as a wedding present. (This 212 foot gleaming white vessel was the scene of many of the more notorious second Lady Docker's most famous parties in the 1950s, but was eventually sold in 1965 to pay off mounting debts, and was moored at Lowestoft until being refitted in Scotland in 2006.)

Bernard Docker was an old Harrovian, who had made a fortune as a director of Anglo-Argentine Tramways, the Midland Bank and Thomas Cook. His most public role was as Chairman of Daimler and as a charitable supporter of hospitals – he was knighted in 1939. However, his marriage to Jeanne Stuart was utterly unsuccessful. His father never approved of an actress joining the family and set private detectives to follow Jeanne, who had continued to act on the London stage. Her friendship with the actor David Hutcheson had been noted and the detectives reported that the pair met "in circumstances which left no doubt of their adultery". The Docker marriage lasted 5 months and was finally dissolved in January 1935. Jeanne gave back the yacht. Bernard Docker always removed any mention of his first wife from reports and reference books, claiming that he never saw her again. Jeanne, however, always said they remained the best of friends and Docker had even wished to re-marry her. Jeanne also continued to refer to herself (outside the business) as Lady Docker after 1939, even though she had never been married to Docker when he was a knight.

Jeanne Stuart immersed herself even more energetically into stage work, and lived with James Stewart when he was serving in the RAF. She lived in a flat in Park Lane, with glorious chandeliers and no sign of wartime thrift, as recalled by Mary Llewellyn, a Denville Hall resident who worked with her in the

hugely successful production of *Quiet Weekend* at Wyndham's. When her flat was burgled, Jeanne lost £5,000 worth of furs and jewels.

For a short period in the War, Jeanne was courted by the 6th Earl of Carnarvon. Whenever Jeanne was back in England from her 1944 ENSA tour of Europe, she stayed with the Earl at Highclere, telling the press it was to avoid the London air raids, but denying any rumours that they would marry. Indeed, straight after the War, Jeanne moved to America, settling on Long Island.

A close neighbour was the Austrian Baron Eugene de Rothschild, who had played host to the Duke of Windsor at Schloss Enzesfeld, immediately after the Abdication. The Baron's first wife, Kitty Wolf, had arranged this difficult three month stay – the Duke was reportedly irascible, particularly as he was barred from seeing Mrs Simpson until her divorce had become absolute. In the War, Eugene had had his properties confiscated and his French nationality cancelled by the Vichy government. He also paid Hitler a substantial ransom to gain his brother Louis's freedom. He then left for America.

When Jeanne met Eugene, he was living in a small two room cottage (reportedly with lovely furniture, some of which remained with Jeanne for the rest of her life) and he was mourning his wife, Kitty, who had died in 1946, and who was buried in the cottage's garden. His housekeeper, Gerty, watched as the Baron was gradually drawn out of his grief by the Czechoslovakian Countess Cecilia Sternberg. In her memoirs, *The Journey*, the Countess recalls how Jeanne and Eugene met. Housekeeper Gerty had met an English girl (actually aged 39 – Jeanne always looked decades younger than she was) “not quite a film star, a starlet let's say” in a shop in Glen Cove, who had cajoled out of Gerty an invitation to lunch to meet the Baron. “I had rarely seen a prettier face, a more ravishing décolleté and more voluptuous curves draped, rather unsuitably for lunch in the country, in pale pink chiffon,” recalled the Countess.

The Baron soon stopped visiting his late wife's grave each morning, and the Countess began to be redundant as a companion. She recalled, “Much to his family's surprise, if not to mine, he married the pretty young English woman Gerty so rashly had introduced to him. Contrary to expectations, it turned out to be a very happy marriage.” The wedding took place in December 1952, and the couple settled in Long Island and New York, returning to England and to a cottage in Oxshott in 1953. Jeanne had found her husband's finances to be in complete disarray but proved her remarkable business sense by helping him retrieve confiscated property and by making sound investments. Finally, in the late 1950s, they settled in Monaco, becoming close friends of Prince Rainier and Princess Grace. They later bought a second apartment, in Geneva, where Jeanne always spent part of the year and retained staff until her death.

The Baron died in April 1976 at the age of 92, when Jeanne was 68. The Baroness continued to live in her large apartment, with, for Monte Carlo, a rare and beautiful large garden where she indulged her love of yellow flowers. She never went into the sun, and never allowed water on her face, and retained an extraordinary and youthful beauty. She set up a drama group, and became a friend and mentor to student actors more than 50 years younger than herself. She regularly gave “just a postage stamp” to TACT and to Denville Hall: donations that turned out to be, for example, £40,000. Richard and Sheila Attenborough visited regularly, from their French farmhouse at Grasse, and recall her infectious wit and her ability to render one helpless with laughter at her stories. Near the end of her life she endured two strokes and the frustrating disability they caused. When she died, peacefully, at the age on 94, the embalmer believed she was 65. The Baroness Jeanne de Rothschild is buried in her husband's family tomb in Monaco.

Besides some specific bequests to her loyal staff and friends, Jeanne showed herself as loyal and devoted to her profession in death as she had been in life. The vast majority of her estate, more than £7.5 million, came to The Actors' Charitable Trust, TACT, with the instruction that half should be used for Denville Hall, and the remainder as the Trustees saw fit. With extraordinary timing, fitting for a star of those drawing room comedies, this benefaction enabled the charity to rebuild and extend Denville Hall, a wing of which is now named in honour of Jeanne de Rothschild.