



The couple at their eldest son Sam's christening



wafts down a short flight of stairs, holding out her hand to me, exclaiming: 'Have we met before? How lovely to meet you! Can I get you a drink?'

I am flabbergasted. She has the upright figure and unlined complexion of a

woman in her 60s, and you'd never know that she has been living with steadily worsening dementia for more than 20 years.

Most people will probably know Pru as Sybil Fawly, the long-suffering wife of John Cleese's Basil Fawly in 1970s sitcom *Fawly Towers*, and

my strongest memories of Tim are as Bertie, Queen Victoria's eldest son, in the 1970s TV series *Edward The Seventh*. But the pair have had hugely successful careers since the 1960s, culminating in *Great Canal Journeys* in their 80s.

Now, Tim has written a book called *Pru & Me*, which charts their enduring love story, offering a heartwarming and, in places, funny account of dealing with Pru's dementia together. Tim says it was written in the hope that sharing their experiences and the ways they have adjusted might be beneficial to anyone in a similar situation.

“We probably hold hands more than we used to”

married in October 1963. They have two sons, Sam (a well-known actor) and Joe (a translator), and along with Juliet, Tim's daughter from his first marriage, now have seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

FIRST SIGNS OF DEMENTIA

In the book, Tim records spotting problems back in 2001, when Pru started to struggle with her lines. 'This was so unlike her,' he says. 'It was just a moment's hesitation, and no one else in the audience noticed, but I did.' She was only 69. In the months that followed, Tim found himself watching Pru like a hawk and tuning in to episodes of forgetfulness that he might previously have brushed aside. 'The symptoms seemed to come and go,' he says, 'and whenever it seemed like Pru was improving, I would pray that it had gone for good.'

But, gradually, Pru found she needed prompter boards to help her theatre performances, and Tim was increasingly taking on a 'prompter' role at home.

The signs were subtle at first. Pru become obsessed by either filling or emptying the dishwasher. Then, she became fixated on making sure there were enough serviettes and placemats on the table for everyone, and that each item was retrieved afterwards.

'She would repeatedly ask me how many people we'd be having for lunch,' says Tim. 'Although she remembered she had asked the question, she would forget my answer, which frustrated her enormously.'

This was a particularly difficult period: 'Pru spent a great deal of time in a state

'It's lovely to see Pru enjoying life'

Actors **Timothy West** and **Prunella Scales** are celebrating 60 years of marriage, as much in love as ever despite her diagnosis of vascular dementia. Louise Atkinson meets the couple and discovers they are dealing with this cruel disease in the most positive and loving way

The last time we saw actors Timothy West and Prunella Scales on TV together was in 2020 for the 10th series of *Great Canal Journeys*, which showed them gently chugging through the English countryside on their narrow boat. Each episode is preceded by the

revelation that Pru's memory is 'not what it was', with Pru laughing and saying, 'It's true! Some days I don't know if it's Monday or Lewisham!'

It's been three years, so I am trepidatious when Tim invites me to meet them both at the south London home they've shared for more than 40 years. Tim, now 88, gets up from the sofa to grip my hand in a fierce shake, but there's no sign of Pru, who is now 91. I'm a little nervous about what to expect, then the kitchen door opens and Pru enters, stage right, looking amazing.

There's not a hint of grey in her immaculately blow-dried hair, and she's sporting a full face of makeup and dressed in slim-fit jeans and trainers.

After sweeping the room with a broad smile and fixing Tim with a beam, she

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

The two actors first met and fell in love back in 1961 when working together on a BBC play. Tim was married at the time, so in a bid to avoid scandal, Pru would write letters, disguising herself as a giddy fan. After one romantic assignation, she wrote, 'Dear Mr West, I thought you were lovely in Oxford this week. I saw you several times, oh you were good. It made all the difference to my life!' signing the letter Miss H Green.

In *Pru & Me*, Tim tells how, as his relationship with Pru flourished, his marriage disintegrated. He and his first wife agreed on a divorce, and Pru and Tim were



Pru with John Cleese in *Fawly Towers*



About to board the Waverley paddle steamer on one of their many trips



Pru celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary (below) and the couple at their marriage blessing (right)



With their son Joe and grandchildren Clem and Felix

of upset. Eventually, she learned to accept it and started saying, "Oh, my lord, have I forgotten again? You must be thoroughly fed up with me!"

"In those early years, I did find social situations tricky. Invitations would fill me with dread because Pru would tell the same joke or anecdote several times, and if she asked how somebody's mother was, and was told they had died, she would offer her condolences, go and get a drink, and then ask the same question again."

DIAGNOSIS

In her mid-70s, Pru was referred to a specialist and, after several tests, was put on a drug called Aricept. 'The effect, alas, was minimal,' says Tim. It wasn't until 2015, aged 81, after more tests, that Pru was finally diagnosed with vascular dementia.

'The diagnosis itself made little or no difference, really,' says Tim. 'What interested me far more was the prognosis.'

They were told Pru's condition would not improve, and the best they could hope for was that her decline remained gradual. As it has. That was when they were approached by Channel 4 and asked if they'd like to make a series about narrow boating - together. It was a hobby they both enjoyed immensely, having bought their own boat back in the early 1980s, and with Pru unable to work, they'd been spending increasing amounts of time on the water together. The prospect of being paid to potter around in boats seemed 'too good to be true', says Tim:

'A whole new adventure for us in our 80s!' The series became extremely popular, with legions of fans tuning in every week to enjoy the couple's travelling exploits and the flirtatious banter between them.

Great Canal Journeys was a whole new adventure for us

Watching the programmes, it is impossible to tell how much or how little Pru is taking in, and the filming cleverly disguises the fact that her hearing was deteriorating fast, too.

A MERCIFULLY SLOW DECLINE

Tim says he's been warned that one day Pru might not recognise him, but right now Pru clearly knows who he is. However, her hearing makes conversation very stilted. When I talk slowly in the hope that she might be able to lip-read, she picks up a few words, but there's a flicker of confusion behind her eyes - she's not sure how to answer my questions.

Then, suddenly, she sparks up - 'Would you like something to nibble?' - and Tim's eyes roll a little. A plate of biscuits appears and calm is restored while Pru delicately holds a biscuit to her mouth in both hands, nipping away at it like a squirrel, demolishing the whole plateful, one at a time. Each garibaldi is consumed with no memory of having eaten the previous one.

'We don't talk about the future, for perhaps obvious reasons,' Tim says a little sadly. 'I have no idea how things are going to go, so we just live day by day. We are tremendously lucky to be healthy, and we have a lovely home surrounded by friends and people to help look after us.'

They have a live-in housekeeper, Gillian

(originally employed to keep an eye on Pru when Tim was away filming), and Tim has an assistant ('my retinue of ladies') who together keep the pair fed and organised, but Tim is keen to emphasise that Gillian is Pru's assistant, not her carer. 'She helps pick out clothes for Pru to wear, but Pru is perfectly capable of dressing herself and she always does her own makeup,' he adds proudly.

TIME FOR A DRINK

At midday, a clock chimes and Pru exclaims, 'It's 12 o'clock! Would anyone like a drink?' and trots off to the kitchen, returning with a bottle of white wine. Tim smiles ruefully. It is clear his days are punctuated by 'Is it time for a nibble?' and 'Shall we have a drink?' moments.

Yet, despite the frustrations, the humour and love between them sparkles through. 'The look on her face when she sees me makes me realise just how much I love her,' he says. 'It's always nice when somebody's pleased to see you, but when that somebody is the love of your life, it makes it extra special.'

As if on cue, Pru sidles over to perch on the arm of the sofa at Tim's side, bending to plant a kiss on the top of his head. And he beams. He *really* beams, affectionately patting her knee.

'If there's one thing I have learned over the past two decades about dementia, it is that no two cases are ever quite the same,' he says. 'I feel lucky that Pru seems happy, and her progression is so slow I barely notice any more.'

'I do find I have to remind her who certain people are,' he tells me. 'I'll say, "Do you remember so-and-so?" and give

her a hint, and we probably hold hands more often than we used to - I think that helps if Pru is feeling a bit wobbly,' he adds.

'Pru's memory might be fading, but her sense of humour certainly hasn't,' he chuckles. 'She's still one of the funniest people I know.'

They still spend days on their narrow boat, take trips to the theatre and plan to celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary in October surrounded by their ever-growing extended family. Although she is not always fully plugged in to what's going on, it is quite clear that Pru is completely content.

'There's a common misconception that people who are suffering from dementia spend their days sitting in a high-seated chair and staring blankly at a wall,' says Tim. Although this might be the case for some sufferers, and, he says, 'it could even happen to Pru one day', they have resolved to keep on moving 'as best we can' and enjoying life to the full.

'After all, just because there's snow on the roof doesn't mean the fire has gone out,' he adds. 'Pru and I are each of an Olympic standard when it comes to making the most of life, and I fancy we always will be.'

• *Pru & Me: A Love Story (Penguin Michael Joseph) by Timothy West is out 28 September*

We don't talk about the future; we just live day by day



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW CROWLEY/TELEGRAPH. GETTY

TIM'S ADVICE: 'Recognise the positives'

KEEP DOING THE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU HAPPY: One of the upsides of Pru's condition - and you must always try to recognise the positives, no matter how small or insignificant they might seem - has been the amount of leisure time we have been able to spend together. We love spending time on our narrow boat. Because of her condition, Pru can't always remember things, but you don't always have to remember things on a canal - you can keep your mind vacant and just enjoy things as you see them. Rather than mourning the person I'm losing, I've found boating together allows me to concentrate on what's still there. Pru loves it! She doesn't help out with the locks like she used to, but she loves just watching the ducks and swans going by. It's lovely to see her enjoying life.

STAY BUSY: Ever since Pru's dementia began to have a direct effect on our lives, I have endeavoured to ensure that we keep on doing the things that make us happy as often as we possibly can. Very little has changed. We still go to the theatre or to a concert (although Pru doesn't remember anything about it afterwards), and we also visit museums and art galleries quite a bit (we are very lucky to have a driver who picks us up and drops us off).

KEEP ON COMMUNICATING: It is important for us both to have something to look forward to, which in turn gives us something to talk about. And we do still talk to each other. Just because Pru can't hear me very well and might forget what I've said in a matter of moments doesn't mean I don't want to tell her things, and vice versa. The two of us not communicating with each other would be unimaginable.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF, TOO: Fortunately, Pru is keen to take a nap once or twice a day, which means I am able to have a rest for a few hours. Pru also has very little concept of time and when she joins me in the living room after she's woken up, we greet one another like a couple might after having been parted for several days. Familiarity no longer breeds contempt in Pru's world, which sometimes helps to neutralise any such feelings I might have at having to continually repeat myself!

BE PATIENT: The part I have always found the most challenging as a carer is remaining patient. I have never been good in this department, and time has done little to change that. I do try to keep everything in check. Not just for Pru's sake, who these days forgets it all in a trice, but for my own, and for the sake of those around us. I don't always get it right, of course. Who on earth does? I do always try, though. I've learned to try to look at things from Pru's perspective - what might she be thinking? It's not always easy to predict, but I think you just have to keep trying. □