

Exposing Hollywood's No. 1 Sophisticate—Mr. Basil Rathbone

WHEN YOU meet Basil Rathbone now, he is the sleek suave movie star. Only he is the one with the superior trimmings. He isn't ordinary Hollywood, you soon discover.

He revels exultantly in life and love, but it's that smooth finesse with which he does it that separates him from the mere amateurs. He has the true connoisseur's appreciation of days and nights experienced to the hilt. Genuinely dashing, a debonair blade, he discusses music, art, or the latest excitement with an ever-scintillating tongue.

But he wasn't always this way!

Today, he moves with the brilliant smart set. He talks of the really interesting things in foreign lands because he travels frequently. He can disclose fascinating whys of human nature, for he can handle himself in any brand of clinch. He had to learn how.

He may be found in an English-style house, in the heart of an appropriate manor garden. His dogs romp beneath

the great trees, and ivy mantles his dignified, paneled front door. But once inside you are blandly whisked to a modern Mayfair flat that seems all powder blue and cream carpeting, satin drapes and mirrors. It is as surprising, indeed, as Basil proves to be.

Give him a situation, now, and he'll master it skillfully. This knack, it shortly appeared, is definitely an acquired one.


At first you suppose the only problem he's ever had is how to get the coveted role of Rhett Butler in "Gone With the Wind."

"The fellow must be characterized from here," declared Basil immediately, index finger to his head. He lounged opposite me in that perfect drawing room of his, defying its formality. He was serious about his present ambition. "You must be glued to Rhett's eyes and what they are attempting to hide of his complex self. He has had Scarlett's number, of course, (Continued on page 86)

BUOYANT BATTLE

BY GEORGE BENJAMIN

Basil Rathbone's problem has been—not to be too clever.



No picture plums ever fall in his lap, asserts Mr. B. He has to fight for the breaks. Here he is with Kay Francis in "Confession."

Buoyant Battler

(Continued from page 44)

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CASH PRIZES FOR YOUR LETTERS
See Page 66



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AFTER

from the beginning and he plays her like a fish!"

Even his current teaming with Claudette Colbert, in "Tovarich," cannot possibly stifle his craving for the prize part of the season. "They haven't even asked me to take a test for it," he admitted. "But I'm explaining to everyone—over the radio, too, whenever I have the chance—that I feel I could do a good job of it!"

Although it looks as though he must have been to his sweeping manner born, he originally had—he confesses honestly—neither a pittance of poise nor any punch. You can't be magnificently mellow until you have risen to that brave point where you take the world by the tail and swing people and circumstances into the niches you select. Basil had to study the trick. He wasn't a natural sophisticate.

Moreover, he hasn't had it easy. For months he's been after Rhett—but then he's always had to campaign deliberately for what he's wanted. "No plums have ever fallen into my lap," he said to me. And then, facilely switching from so dramatic a way of putting it into sheer simplicity, he was specifically astonishing.

He was born in Johannesburg, South Africa. His English parents had gone there because his mining engineer father thought that where there were diamonds there should be wealth. At the tender age of four, Basil, accompanied by a new brother and sister, settled with his parents back in a London suburb. He was duly sent to a private school.

"My childhood memory focuses around the cuckoo clock in my grandfather's home. I used to lie awake and listen to it make the lusiest row. I never had any doubts as to what I wished to become. I wanted to be an actor. That was an amazing, one might say, a ridiculous idea to my family. The Rathbones were solid old British stock. They were business folk, living quietly and comfortably as the backbone of the country should. They were well off. Rathbone Brothers of Liverpool dealt in cotton. They had shipping interests. Everyone hoped I'd behave myself.

"But I was determined to become an actor, somehow. I began to realize that there were, after all, a few Rathbones who weren't mentioned much. There was my uncle who was the sculptor and who had invested his income in a little factory where he turned out hand-made, hand-painted Della Robia pottery. There was another uncle who devoted himself to the making of superb tapestries, an appalling end for a legacy. My own father, I observed cautiously, had taken his inheritance and gone valiantly into business and to no avail. Father had a flair for writing and for the theatre, but he had suppressed himself. He was artistic through and through and he tackled the traditional business destiny with wretched results.

"I stumbled upon the fact that Grandfather Rathbone, who'd been a rich pillar of Liverpool, had dabbled in poetry on the side and had even had a volume of his poems published. Further, he entertained Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, the famous acting couple, in his home. He had distinguished himself as being the only man who'd ever gone to sleep while the silvery-voiced Henry Irving was speaking directly to him. A rocking-chair was too irresistible to him on that noted evening! "And my grandfather on my mother's

side—he'd had tuberculosis and retired to South Africa to die at a modest time of life. But there, he'd not only survived splendidly until he was a ripe seventy, but he blossomed as a new nation's foremost water-color painter. Whenever I was worried as to how I'd dare break over the traces I recalled these indisputable truths.

IN school I was perpetually dreaming of the theatre. I wrote scads of plays. They were wild melos. And of no earthly use so far as classes went. Finally I did shine brightly for one week. Instead of 'that boy' I was It momentarily. We had to write an essay on 'The Merchant of Venice' and that was a complete snap for me. I turned in a triumph entitled, 'Was Shylock the Hero of a Tragedy or the Villain of a Comedy?' My profundity was a sensation.

"My problem in school, you see, was a peculiar one. It was to be not too clever. I couldn't risk being promoted. The head of the form above mine had no sympathy with athletics and I had to see that I didn't know too much or I'd be promoted to him and then I'd never have fun. I was seventeen when I received that letter from my father saying there wouldn't be enough money for me to return in the fall. I was heartbroken, because that next year I would have won my colors in football and cricket and a pair of tall silver candlesticks if I'd won—as I think I could have—the half-mile in the track events."

He had to come home and show signs of becoming a respectable business man. "In England," mused Basil, "there are no little wise-crackers. You're still a child until you're out of your teens. 'What'll we do with him?' debated the family. I had an uncle who was president of an insurance company, so I was stuck in his London office to work up.

"How I solaced myself with the rebellious thought that somehow I'd escape such a dull fate! I licked stamps until my tongue felt like the bottom of a parrot's cage. It should be," he smiled, "a pleasure to send out office mail now that the personal touch isn't obligatory. I was promoted to the telephone board and nearly escaped then and there. The manager had no sense of humor. The name of the illustrious firm was The Liverpool, London and Globe Insurance Company. I got the London out first in a few instances. The manager was horrified.

"My good young man," he informed me, "although your family has an important place in this business, you have made a grave error several times. It must be stopped."

"I did all my 'learning' during my luncheon hour, in a vacant office I'd discovered on the floor above. There I was hidden away and I could 'practice' without interruption. I learned, and precisely what it was going to get me I didn't know, some sixty long poems, ranging from Browning and Shelley through Byron. I taught myself a repertoire of Shakespeare. Not that I had nerve enough to let a soul in on these secret lessons!

"I'm remembering the stunt my brother pulled on the staid business men of London! Every morning I came into the city, arriving at Victoria Station with thousands of other men who timed themselves by glancing up Victoria Street to the huge clock on Westminster Abbey. That gesture reassured you as you hurried to your bus.

MODERN SCREEN

It so happened one morning that everyone was frantically late, an entire hour late. There was a panting rush to offices. And all because late the night before my brother and another lad, students at Westminster School, had the inspiration of inspirations. They'd crawled perilously along balustrades and climbed up ledges and advanced the hand of that clock!

"One morning I decided to challenge the Gods. I resigned. I knew that within another year or so they intended to make me a branch manager at \$2500. a year. But I'd sat at a desk and added forty or fifty pages of figures, hunting for an elusive ha'pence, and I'd kept promising myself that I'd get out of there before I was sunk. I went from the office straight to see Sir Frank Benson, a cousin who had perhaps England's most extraordinary theatrical company. He trouped in Shakespeare and had three different units. Beginners often paid to learn acting from him.

"When he asked me what I could do I stood up and went through one of Shylock's main scenes, giving a pertinent voice to each character, and presenting the whole thing with gusto. I couldn't do as well now, I'm afraid. But then, at last before someone of the theatre, I hadn't a trace of fear; I knew I was good. He asked if my father would consent to my trying to act and I lied furiously; I knew father couldn't stop me. Sir Frank was always afraid I'd coast because I was a relative, so invariably he made things harder for me.

"Certain men can look at horseflesh and say 'I believe this is going to be a winner,' he stated solemnly when I'd finished my stunt. 'I think you ought to make an interesting actor. But it's up to you. I'll put you in the Number Two

company and you can do two roles a night and there'll be ten plays in the repertoire. Your salary will be one pound a week.'

YES, my parents were worried," Basil confessed. "I was only nineteen, they'd gotten me a job with a sound future. Actor? I was plunging into an uncharted field. Into something where there was no guarantee. Besides, at nineteen everyone presumes he can act. I knew I would succeed, but no one else knew it. Everyone warned me of my foolishness, but I had that stupendous confidence of youth."

For fifteen months he toured, ecstatically doing bits, living on his \$4.85 a week. "I was so one-track that it would really have been difficult for me to have failed," Basil, who is so cosmopolitan, so enthusiastic on every subject, a one-track mind?

"I wanted to get away from people, to live in a dream world of my own and shut out reality. I dreaded frankness and friendships. Fortunately that was the peak of the English theatre then. The theatre was glamorous beyond words. All the great actors had their own theatres and starred in them for years. You became tops and you stayed in your nice shell. Now an actor isn't sure of his reputation beyond his last play or picture! I didn't have to come out of my dreams. I didn't have to be practical, as I do now. I viewed everything in terms of the theatre. When I had the flu I contentedly read more plays. I couldn't discuss anything else but backstage; I never spoke except about theatrical technique."

So no wonder he was promoted to Benson's Number One company. At twenty he was touring the United States in Shakespeare, enacting second leads and earning \$35. a week. "I managed to save

out of that, too. Although I can't forget El Paso because we crossed the border to look at Juarez and we met a gentleman who showed us the bull-ring and led us into gambling away most of our savings!

"We economized by four of us young fellows taking one hotel room with two double beds. We ate at cafeterias and it was such fun gazing at all the food in sight before choosing what would be most filling." Basil, whose dinner parties are events in Hollywood, grinned like a college lad.

The troupe moved from city to city in two cars of its own. "Two day coaches in which we economically sat up nights. We'd buy cans of Sterno and take turns cooking our meals whenever we were on a train."

MRS. BASIL RATHBONE is the former Ouida Bergere, talented scenario writer, who abandoned her career when they married. But Basil, the ideal husband in Hollywood apparently, was married once before. He wasn't quite so one-track as he described himself, for the girl who played opposite him was evidently too attractive to be ignored. He hasn't wholly altered; at least he could be impetuous then.

He was twenty-one and he'd made no acquaintances outside of the troupe. But what did that matter? A lot of marrying was going on in the company. It was spring and he had a sweetheart! As soon as the American tour was over there was a London ceremony and two were to be one forever after. They honeymooned at Stratford-On-Avon, acting Shakespeare at the famed summer festival.

But two months after, the World War burst upon them. For four years Basil was away at the Front. He won, I have

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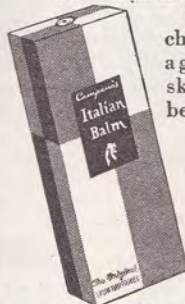
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Robert Kent and Astrid Allwyn (Mrs. Kent to you), among those present at the Gershwin concert at the Hollywood Bowl.

found out elsewhere, a lieutenantcy and a military cross. He can cut with a mere word, on the screen; in person he doesn't boast.

The cool cynicism he can display belies his real self. Actually, he is an absolute romantic. He has a command to his vigor, and yet love to him must be spiritual, or it isn't the real thing.

There were hasty trips to a small London apartment, week-ends when he got away from the cannons of the war. Gradually, though, there just was no more bloom to that union.

"When I was demobilized life suddenly had no purpose," he said. "I was so young that the War, in spite of its horrors, had been a tremendous adventure. But no destroyers escorted us back across the channel. We'd felt used to them, as though they were for our very own benefit. The camp looked shoddy; officers no longer meant anything at all. And London—I found my mother dead, that my brother had been killed in the fighting. There was no money left. Nor," he added softly, "was there anything left to what I'd imagined was the passion of my life."

"The theatre? Make-up and rehearsals seemed so blah right then. Yet I had to work and all I knew was the Benson companies. I heard the Stratford festival was being reorganized. I went after a part."

Constance Collier, who starred in "Peter Ibbetson" on Broadway, saw him. She was seeking a leading man for her London production, someone who could equal John Barrymore's interpretation in America. She saw Basil and knew he was the one. And, at twenty-five, unfamiliar to the critical audiences of London, he was an overnight hit.

"That first night," he exclaimed, "will never leave me. All the fine men of the theatre, the actors whom I'd worshipped from a distance, were there. And they walked up on the stage to congratulate me! Forbes Robertson, whose 'Hamlet' I'd seen four times. Sir John Hare and all the rest!"

STILL, it wasn't success that finally brought him out of his shell. "I never went out socially after that night. I was as solitary as ever. Eventually, when people insisted that I mix I did try it. But

everything I did was wrong when I attempted to be a gay fellow. I was a little too exuberant. I laughed and joked too noisily. I was putting on an act. Of course, I really had no consideration for the viewpoint of others. I wasn't interested in the world in general. Expanding was a sad debacle!"

So it was until Ouida came along. He went from one stage success to another, but his inner life was unfulfilled until he met her. He was starring on Broadway. She was giving one of her gala parties and he was inveigled into attending. She was giving one of her gala week-ends at her country home soon after and he didn't have to be asked twice. After that week-end he knew he was in love.

For three years he courted her. They had a most romantic wedding in a Park Avenue apartment. A candle-lit, flower-decked altar where they took vows that have proved far more than idle protestations.

"If I've changed," said Basil, offering me a cocktail and a cigarette, "and learned how to enjoy people and places and everything that goes on about us today, it's because of Ouida. She is so vital, so sophisticated in every sense of the word, that I couldn't lag behind. I have some pride, you know! Her appreciation of fine music, of the theatre, of art was one of our first bonds. But it is her relish for exacting the most from every waking moment that enchants me, I suppose."

With Ouida beside him he has become a foremost Hollywood figure, personally and professionally.

"I don't want romantic leads, as some interviewers have persistently reported. I want variety. I don't mind being a bad man in pictures, although I do object to having to be a bloodless, inhuman sort. I believe"—and he cocked an eyebrow at me—"that I could play Rhett Butler as he ought to be played. From here." His index finger retouched his black, black hair. "I rather know how he became the man he is. He learned that you have to come out of your dreams to get ahead in this practical, modern age. He clung secretly to his romantic ideals. You see, he—"

But we were right where we'd started. Love has made Basil Rathbone a happy, buoyant battler.