



Rathbone as *Murdstone* in screen version of *David Copperfield*



In *Anna Karenina*, Rathbone is cast as Miss Garbo's husband

It's Cheers for BASIL RATHBONE *Now*

Basil Rathbone's performance, as *Copperfield's* stepfather, was a cameo of cruelty, but it made a name for him. And Garbo, recognizing genius, quickly made him her leading man

BY PAULA HARRISON

WHEN I heard that Basil Rathbone was to play *David's* sadistic stepfather in *Copperfield*, I recoiled. Not *that* attractive actor, I protested to myself, not the man who'd played the greatest lover of them all opposite Katherine Cornell. Not *Romeo* as *Murdstone*, I pleaded wildly, if silently, to the powers that be. Say it ain't so, Joe. *Murdstone* is the villainous uncle in *David Copperfield*.

Then I saw the picture and ate dirt—once in apology, once in homage to an inspired piece of casting and acting. Keener eyes than mine had seen clearly what I had missed,—that Rathbone the actor could subdue Rathbone the gallant lover, that his lean, patrician features could be hardened beyond mere strength into flint, that the fire in his eyes could be somber, and that, on the other hand, his dark charm could make credible what—to me, at any rate—had never been credible in the book: poor little *Mrs. Copperfield's* infatuation.

He smiled when I told him of my first reaction. "You and I both," he observed with an engaging blend of American idiom and British precision of speech. Talking to him is like trying to follow a plane that soars over ground you've been accustomed to plod on foot. His eager, in-

quiring mind leaps instinctively from the spring board of a question into the realm of ideas—and you become stimulated by new vistas and horizons of thought. Being the courteous person he is, he not only defers to your choice of theme, but manages somehow to convey the impression that you're doing him a favor by letting him talk at all. That is a strange phenomenon.

"INTERVIEWS," he assured me comfortingly, "give you a chance to clarify your own ideas. If you have any manners, you don't ordinarily talk about yourself. But an interview allows you that privilege. So, if I abuse it, stop me, will you?" Rathbone was smiling.

"I refused the part of *Murdstone* five times," he told me, "and finally took it as one takes any desperate chance—with my heart quaking and my fingers crossed. Because I'd tried the films before, you know. Or rather, they'd tried me and found me wanting."

That was a thing I couldn't understand. It happened that I'd never seen Rathbone in a picture till I saw *David Copperfield*. But I'd seen him in half a dozen legitimate plays, where he'd dominated his every scene—not only by virtue of his technical skill but [Continued on page 73]

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also because of a glowing personality. And if he hadn't registered in pictures, I was there to proclaim that the fault lay with the cameras or the Kliegs, the scenarios or the script girls or the spooks that haunt Hollywood studios—with anyone, in short, but Basil Rathbone. Of that, I was sure.

The movie moguls must have reached the same conclusion during the two weeks he played Los Angeles with Katherine Cornell. He couldn't be overlooked any more than you can overlook a patch of crimson on a sandy hill. His phone began buzzing with inquiries as to when he'd be free, and what his plans were. His plans were to continue with Miss Cornell. Nothing else.

"You see, I'd been grooved," he explained in those pleasant, clipped accents which are just British enough to fall kindly on the ear and not British enough to be incomprehensible. "I'd been grooved as a drawing-room actor, a fellow who knew how to kiss ladies' hands and tell them sweet nothings, but wasn't up to much else. I didn't want to go back to the films in that kind of part. I'd had my fill of them, and apparently so had the public. I wanted something different—and I got it—with a vengeance," he murmured, his brows tilting, "when they began bombarding me with requests to play *Murdstone*."

Five times he wired back an uncompromising "No." "You can't play a part you loathe," he kept telling himself and his wife. "You can't play a man who's poison to you."

BUT finally he closed his eyes and jumped into *Murdstone*. And from that day to the day he left the studios, he never knew a peaceful moment. "I was in one long state of perpetual revulsion," he told me. "You've seen little Freddie—you've seen him in the picture at any rate. Then you know how difficult it must have been to look at the child as though you disliked and resented him, when your whole heart reacted in just the opposite way. He's a grand little boy—normal, well-balanced—he understood perfectly what it was all about. He'd look up and smile at me before we went into one of those vile scenes—and thus making it all the harder for me to go through with it.

"When I saw the first rushes, I wanted to give it up. To this day I don't know how they made me look so cruel. I hated the thought that I *could* look so cruel. I hated the whole damned thing from start to finish!" He spoke with a kind of fierce intensity that seemed to relieve him of all his pent-up loathing. "I even hated George Cukor at times—childishly, illogically—for the things he made me do. And this I want to say. Whatever credit's due belongs not to me, but to him. I know it's the fashion to say pleasant things about one's director, but believe me, this has

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nothing to do with fashion. He can get anything out of anyone—the tenderest sentiment, the bitterest cruelty. He wanted cruelty from me and he got it. He was the whip. He stood over me like a circus-master over a trained seal."

BASIL finished the part and went back to a New York season with Miss Cornell. He tried to stop thinking of *Murdstone*, since all his thinking brought him up against the same blank wall of doom. The picture broke in New York while he was playing *Romeo*.

"There was a break for me," he went on, his face brightening. "With *Murdstone* in *David Copperfield* at one theatre, I was playing the most beautiful love scenes ever written at another. I think it saved me in New York. It saved my peace of mind, at any rate. When *Murdstone* glowered, I'd push his ugly face away and say to myself: 'Tonight I go out and play *Romeo*.'"

But *Murdstone's* face, ugly as ever, lost some of its sinister quality one night when a wire from David Selznick came to the theatre, asking Mr. Rathbone to play the part of *Karenin* opposite Garbo. An excited consultation was held after the performance. Miss Cornell insisted that nothing should stand in the way of this opportunity—not even his contract with her. "And here I am," Rathbone agreed.

"In the promised land?" I reminded him, smiling mischievously.

"I don't know yet," he admitted candidly. "But at any rate, I don't seem to have broken my neck." He felt of it to make sure. "I still hate the *Murdstone* rôle, mind you. I won't compromise on that point. But in all fairness, I have to acknowledge that he's been instrumental in getting me *Karenin*, and *Karenin's* been instrumental in getting me the *Marquis* in *Tale of Two Cities*. *Murdstone* brought me no friends—that's hardly surprising—but perhaps he did make people conscious of me," he said, his lightness masking a note of real feeling, of genuine emotion.

"*Karenin*," he continued, "is a human being—a man whose point of view you can see even though you don't wholly sympathize with it. To me he's an even more tragic figure than *Anna*—for there's no greater tragedy than that of the person who feels, but is so bound by convention that he can't give expression to his feeling. I can understand him. I can put myself into his shoes as I couldn't into *Murdstone's*, and I've never been so happy or at ease in any picture," he added contentedly.

I TRIED to lead him by what I flattered myself was circuitous routes to the forbidden shrine. But the forthright Mr. Rathbone put me and my guile to shame by coming straight to the point.

"You want to know about Garbo! Well, I'll tell you all I know myself—that since I've played with her, the heavens themselves could shriek sphinx

and enigma without shaking my conviction that she's one of the simplest, most genuine people ever born. There's a kind of simplicity you can't be fooled by, and that's her kind. She may be puzzled by life, she may be torn by inner doubts—but her attitude toward the world is honest—no publicity stunt—no bid for attention—but the natural result of her natural inclinations. There's not a drop of the fake in her." For myself, I needed no persuasion; but the sourest Garbo-skeptic, watching the thoughtful face of this man of wide background and experience, hearing the quiet certainty in his voice, would have been convinced in spite of himself.

I asked about Freddie, who's playing his son in *Anna Karenina*.

"We're buddies," he informed me solemnly, "and settle the world's affairs together." He leaned forward suddenly, his hands between his knees, his face lighting up till it looked not much older than Freddie's. "As a matter of fact, he's spending next Sunday with me. We've just come out of a series of important conferences on the subject of dinner."

It was a pleasant picture he'd left with me—of a little figure and a tall one, cantering side by side, swimming in a sunlit pool, romping with the dogs (all five of them), facing each other over their native roast beef—two English gentlemen, spending a day together: the child whose *David* won him the heart of the world—the man whose *Murdstone* may have made him no friends but, if there's any virtue in signs and portents, will make a real name for him in films.



Dressed here in old clothes and tennis shoes, Dick Powell is energetically working in his yard