



The vine-covered, English-type home of the Basil Rathbones is the scene of memorable parties that express ideas of epicurean entertaining in Hollywood.

First Host of HOLLYWOOD

BY DICKSON MORLEY

HE is the first host of Hollywood. To-day his parties are acclaimed the best.

But they aren't typical movie gatherings. Rather, they are modern throwbacks to true elegance.

When you are the guest of Basil Rathbone and his wife, Ouida Bergère, whether at a small dinner for Norma Shearer, a costume ball for all the stars, or a celebration for a few chums, you are present at an event, a social event.

Yet, astonishingly, Basil, who entertains so perfectly, insists that he gives but few parties.

"I'm not a sociable person, myself," he said as we sat alone before the reflecting fireplace in the drawing-room of his home, a shingled English manor set in a sheltered garden with trees and ivy around the entrance.

The outside of the house had lent no clue to what was forthcoming. The interior is overwhelmingly smart. You find yourself in a veritable Mayfair flat which has been transplanted to southern California. The drawing-room walls are a symphony of powder blue, purple glass and great mirrors.

"I'm an unsocial person," Basil reiterated. "It's my wife who loves to entertain. She does all the work. She is a brilliant, amazingly versatile woman who abandoned her own career of writing when we married. Now, in parties, her executive, artistic and romantic talents get a chance for expression. Ouida thrives on people, so a party is like a

first night to her. An absolutely thrilling event. If our guests enjoy themselves, she goes to sleep with a blissful sigh of achievement.

"I should say her first trick is this: she takes infinite pains—if we're having twenty in for dinner she wants a week to prepare that evening. For a larger party she wants a month. Then she proceeds to map out the motif, the distinctive flavor. She supervises every single detail, down to having each place-card in her own writing.

"Ouida has a marvelous eye for line and color. She realized how apparent height would help the drawing-room. She had plate glass put above the French windows and draped curtains from the ceiling. She added the mirrors—which are movable. She's artistry itself, aware of what's best in paintings, sculpturing, and so on, so she didn't need any regular decorator."

Despite the Rathbones' reputation as super-party givers, Basil insists he has fulfilled the function of First Host of Hollywood but comparatively few times.

"To be exact, we have given but four large parties in the seven years we have had a home in Hollywood. When I

entered pictures we had a costume ball at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Literally five years lapsed before we again had several hundred guests! Then a year ago last Christmas we had Harold Grieve coöperate on an old-fashioned snow-covered setting for our ballroom—which is over the garage. King Winter miraculously reigned, even to five boys singing holiday carols at the front gate."

Last spring Basil and Ouida marked their eleventh wedding anniversary with a spectacular bridal ball in the Victor Hugo café restaurant. They transformed it, and every one arrived attired as a noted bride or groom.

At the end of last summer the Gene Raymonds and the Buddy Rogerses were honored at a beautiful garden dinner. Lilies of the valley were profuse. A wedding march prelude, Russian singers leading the toasting, and still that wasn't all. The swimming pool had become a lake, flower-fringed, with a center fountain springing from a vase of flowers.

Few parties, perhaps, but memorable ones. The secrets, perhaps, are Basil as host and Ouida as hostess.

Basil went on enthusiastically. "There are local peculiarities. In Holly-

wood guests must be invited ahead of time; every one's time is scheduled to the teeth. Then, since anything can happen to upset dates at any time, 'regrets' may come instead of your friend. You have to rise above that with aplomb. Also, people here are generally late. In London and New York that's bad form; here it's a growing bad habit. We ask our guests, consequently, to be here an hour before we tell the chef we'll sit down."

The famous open-house Hollywood parties, horribly informal affairs, with guests in sweaters and slacks and too many cocktails, is completely foreign to the Rathbones.

"We never entertain in the afternoon," said Basil, "and we object to dropper-inners. They drop right out again. We are very happy to see our friends, but every one has the privilege of privacy. I regret the disregard of the formalities of good manners; I don't advocate snobbishness, but the old English custom of thinking of others is a nice one. After all, when you drop in you aren't considering the other fellow's plans. One's first privilege is to himself. When we are merry-minded, we let it be known.

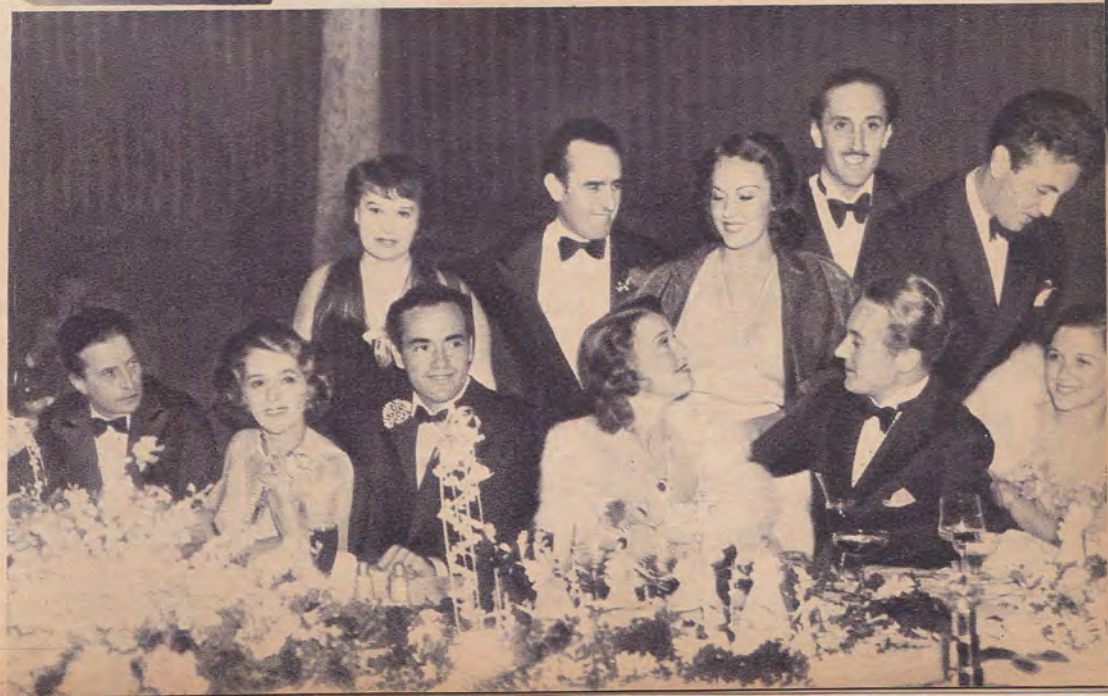
"No one ever comes to dinner in our home in pajamas or sweatshirt, or in studio make-up. I've no use for that sort of thing. People have to change eventually; they should respect their hosts sufficiently to appear in the proper garb.

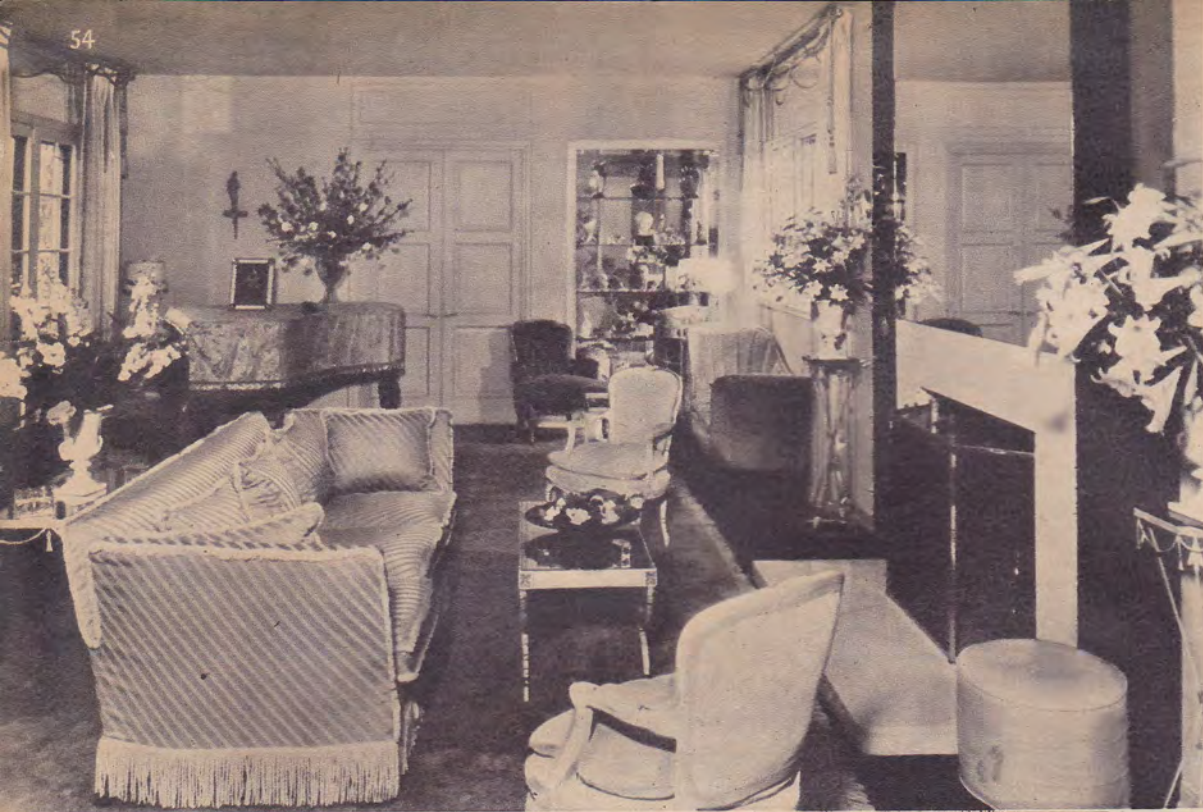
"Drinking? I don't care to cast slams, but America is woefully naïve about drinking. And nowhere do they know less about it than in Hollywood! Nevertheless, no one ever spoils our parties by overindulgence. Personally, I don't like cocktails, don't care for mixtures. I prefer something like Dubonnet. We serve the pertinent light wines, sherry with fish, liqueurs. They add the overtones to splendidly cooked food.

"No," he replied to a question interposed, "I've not brought English dishes over here. I appreciate all sorts of food; we're epicures for variety. So I can't give you any pet recipes. When we have more than a dozen to dinner we employ a caterer, with whom Ouida makes out our menu. We haven't enough silver for more than a few, and the caterer brings the linen, the flowers and such trimmings, as well as what we're to eat. Afterward he moves everything into his truck and there are no pantry details for our servants. Thus, our servants can devote themselves to our guests and next morning the house is as orderly as though no one had been here."

The hospitable dining room is of deep blue and burgundy-red relieved by white.

Small, distinguished parties are the Rathbones' rule. Seated: Mary Pickford, Buddy Rogers, Jeanette MacDonald, Gene Raymond, Irene Hervey. Standing: Mrs. Rathbone, Harold Lloyd, Fay Wray, Mr. Rathbone, Allan Jones.





Like a smart Mayfair flat is the drawing-room in powder blue, purple glass and inset mirrors, some of them cobalt.

Basil is absorbed in the guest list for his next party, tensely discriminating in his choice of congenial souls.

Which leads to the exceptional essence of a Rathbone party, whatever its size or kind. Remember—it was the Rathbones who had the courage to have the screen's four prima donnas—Jeanette MacDonald, Grace Moore, Lily Pons, and Gladys Swarthout—at one time. Their smaller evenings are equally popular. But whatever the occasion, there are no silly gags. And no card or guessing games.

"The object of a party, as we see it," Basil explains, "is to relax physically and be stimulated mentally. Dinner is a function, a delightful one. We prefer to sit down, rather than to have a buffet where the strain is apt to be hectic. After dinner one naturally relaxes and is ready to be intrigued. Conversation, that neglected and incomparable pastime, begins to flow. Soon we are all vitally alive, honestly developing our myriad ideas. We range from cabbages to kings and upstairs in the hall the Capehart is playing wonderful music as an undertone. If you can't talk or revel in music you won't like us!

"One of the most successful nights we've ever had was when twenty of us sat on the porch out there after dinner. Besides picture folk there were such authors as Hugh Walpole and James Hilton. A group who could contribute to a provocative evening. We began speaking of the theater and our favorite plays. We progressed to our favorite lines. I had to run upstairs for my Shakespeare—to read my unforgettable line in the third act of 'Richard II.' Every one began reaching for books. We sat there talking, believe it or not, until dawn!



"When midnight arrives, if your guests are thinking about a supper snack your party is not a triumph. When you're forced back on food to captivate there's been something missing. There's been dull moments, some wrong guests invited.

"But," he adieued, "I don't underestimate a kitchen finale. 'Let's raid the icebox,' some one will remark. The drift is on. Chicken legs, lamb legs, disappear down illustrious throats. And Ouida, seeing all this, is in seventh heaven. I decide the world's all right, too!"