The Host of Hollywood

A week-end at Basil Rathbone’s luxurious home, where the screen’s suavest "villain" is unmasked to reveal the perfect host and husband, proves both novel and newsy

By Dick Pine

BASIL RATHBONE and I were members of the same regiment in the late, not too lamented war. We didn’t lie in the same trench, nor did we save each other’s lives, or anything. We didn’t even join the London Scottish at the same time. In fact, he had never laid eyes on me until we had both been in Hollywood for some time. But there’s something about that old regiment which makes us all kin (once we find out about it), and that is the reason for Basil’s invitation to spend a week-end with him en famille.

In fairness to him, I warned him that I possessed a nose for a story, and that I might, for the benefit of Screenland’s readers, unmask him—Rathbone the villain, Rathbone the elegant, Rathbone, Hollywood’s Number One party-giver. And if you have any preconceived notions (as I had), prepare to shed them now (as I did).

I arrived shortly after noon on a Saturday, clutching my bags, and asking foolish questions about where to leave my car. Rathbone has room for forty cars or so at the rear of his vine-covered house. Nellie was patient with me. Nellie is the trim little English maid whom the Rathbones imported when they returned from England on their last trip. Two West Highland terriers in the hall were not quite so patient as Nellie. They nearly knocked me flat, although, after a little cautious conversation, I gathered that their exuberance was distinctly friendly. Then, Ambrose made his quiet appearance.

Ambrose is an extremely important member of the Rathbone menage. He, too, is English, Rathbone the villain, Rathbone the elegant, Rathbone the perfect host, and Rathbone the friend and "war buddy" of the author—you meet them all under the most cordial circumstances in this stimulating story. Right, Basil as Ahmed in "Marco Polo," and above, in "Robin Hood."
and has the most uncanny sense of anticipation of one's wants, whether they be Basil's or a guest's. Ambrose took me in tow, and a moment later, I found myself in an enormous chair in Rathbone's own particular sanctuary—a dark-walled room with gay Venetian blinds, monk's cloth sort of stuff here and there, scores of books, a white desk, and another dog who looked at me, but said nothing. Then Basil burst in.

"Didn't know you were here, old chap! Did Ambrose take your bags? You're just across the hall. Ouida—Mrs. Rathbone—will be here in a second. Did you find a cigarette? Let's talk a few minutes, and then we'll do something." In the few minutes which elapsed before Mrs. Rathbone appeared, Basil and I had dismissed the War, discussed tennis, and touched on motion pictures. He interrupted before we got very far with that subject. "Are you interested in 16 mm. film?" he inquired. A truly fanatic gleam came into his eye. "Before you leave, I simply must show you some of my film. I have thousands of feet of it. There's London, Paris, Vienna, Budapest. First shot I made was when I was leaving Pasadena for England, and I've a complete record from then on. I've also taken a lot of stuff on the sets. Ambrose cuts the film for me. You will see it, won't you?"

I was mulling something which I hoped sounded enthusiastic, when Mrs. Rathbone, vivacious and pretty, came in to greet me, to bustle with brief plans for her own afternoon, to ask after Basil's plans, to hope that we would remain cheerful and good friends until she could join us before dinner. "And don't let Basil bore you with his motion pictures," she concluded, before she was off like a gay and busy breeze.

"You're going to see pictures, if it's the last thing I do," said Basil grimly, as Ambrose entered the room. Ambrose went quietly to a cupboard, and drew therefrom a tattered sweater, an old pair of crepe-soled shoes, and the most disreputable pair of brown trousers I have ever seen. At the sight of these habiliments, Leo, the spaniel, who had been reposing on the studio couch, suddenly went mad, dancing, leaping, yapping.

"Ambrose and Leo think I'm planning to go walking," Basil explained. "Ambrose always knows what I want to do, before I know it myself. Leo doesn't know he is going walking until he sees these trousers." He held them up and chuckled. They had holes in the knees and in the seat. "Dog-walking garments. Had 'em for years. And they're not done for, yet. Hope you brought something disreputable with you. Rodion, my son, you know, is coming, too."

I nodded, and went across the hall to my room, where I found that Ambrose had laid out some flannel bags, a sweater, which looked almost indecently new to me, and some sports shoes. I hadn't expected to feel overdressed with this Rathbone man, but I really did wish I had a hole in something.

I eventually found Basil and Rodion out by the six little dog houses, where Rodion was putting them on leash. Recently from England, where he has taken a course at Bristol University in electrical engineering, he had just received news that day to report to the sound department at Warners' studio, the following Monday. As Rodion went ahead of us with the dogs, Basil explained: "I thought, maybe, he might like to try the acting end of the business, but after watching me he decided that he couldn't stand the extra obligations of an actor's life—I mean the conferences with agents between pictures; conferences with publicity representatives; interviews; dentists. (Please turn to page 88)
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and all the other things that are part of an actor's job, but which don't appear on the screen."

We were now thick in the underbrush of Griffith Park, and the going began to be heavy for our sedentary reporter. Basil and I were in a story conversation, and the subject of parties arose. I observed that he should be an authority on the subject of parties, since he is looked upon as Hollywood's Number One party-giver. I thought that I detected a slight irritation in his reply.

"We're really not big party givers. Last year we gave two—only two. They were extensively written up in the newspapers and magazines because they happened to be somewhat original. They were really Ouida's parties. As you know, Ouida, before we were married, was a scenarist. She is possessed of boundless energy, which has to find a vent. When we were married, she told me that one career for a family was sufficient, and that career was to be mine. Well, I was an actor, and an actor was more or less of a vagrant when he came to setting up a permanent home. A writer can, at any rate, she gave up her career. Well, since then, thanks to my lucky stars (and motion pictures) I seem to be fairly well set, and have made it possible for us to put down in our permanent roots to such an extent that Ouida is now working on an original story for the screen, and we shall probably see her back in her old block of success."

"But returning to this party business. We're really not gay people at all. Three hundred days out of the three hundred and sixty five days we are quietly at home. And when I say dining quietly, I mean dining informally. We never dress on those occasions. As for quietness, I can't say we're quiet people. I hope you don't mind, old chap, but I really should warn you about conversation at dinner. We talk. We all talk. We talk loudly, very loudly. You one career is a family block. We love to hear ourselves talk!"

"I thought, when Rodion came out, he would, maybe, have a tempering effect, but, it seems, he made me just as stubbornly as I did. He loudly as Ouida and I. When the three of us get going, we're really rather dreadful. You'll see at dinner tonight. I don't know what you'll talk about, but, I bet upon it, it will be something controversial. Anyhow, we'll have such a good time. At least, we Rathbones will!"

I make my weary flow, I talk hard, and eventually find myself again in my room, wondering whether the marvelous Ambrose had guessed rightly how I would be feeling by then. There was my robe laid out, and the coverlet of the bed turned invitingly back. I showered, and lay down. Came a knock on the door, followed by Basil followed by Nellie with a tray of food. Made as only the Rathbone can make it. There were no fancy little cakes, sandwiches, or other useless impediments. Just tea.

"We'll swallow this, and then there'll be time for me to show you my 16 mm. pictures," said Basil, with that fantastic look in his eye. "I know you'll be interested. Or will you? He eyed me sternly, and then answered his proposition: "I know you will." I mumble something about not being able to wait until I see them, and we drink our tea and wander over to his den to get out our shooting material.

I look at the photographs over Basil's desk. He comes over to explain. The next voice you hear will be that of Basil Rathbone, screen villain, believe it or not:

"That's Ouida, when I first met her; that's Ouida, when we were married; that's Ouida three years ago; that's Ouida today; that's Rodion when he was born; that's Rodion when he was six months old; that's Rodion when he was ten—" Basil had forgotten his motion pictures, and his other channels. Not that I didn't want to look at his motion pictures! Perish the thought! The question of food came up, as it has a habit of doing and so has the question of cream and fruit and wine. But you'll see tonight. I think we're going to have some of his mushroom soup, and then some squash." As Basil said this, I swear, that I detected a squab glint in his eye. We talked then about dishes we had had in London, Paris, Marseilles, and points North, East, South, and West. That Ambrose entered, and began to lay out some clothes for Basil. I rose, mumbled something about regretting that we had not found time to see the motion picture, and made my way to the room where I found that Ambrose had done the same for me.

In due course, I descended to the living room, just in time to see Nellie bringing in such hot drinks. Mrs. Rathbone, who had found a seat near her, and we drifted into inconsequential pleasantries. Before the fire was a tempting array of canapes. The living room is not large, but there are the thick draperies, the thick glass panels, before which were white flowers. It was a combination of smartness and comfort. Mrs. Rathbone was wearing a gown which was of the same comfort and smartness; a tea-gown kind of thing. Basil and Rodion came in, and conversation became lively. We started on doughnuts, we touched on the best of the Smollet, Fielding, and Dickens; thence to music from Beethoven to Gershwin.

We had just embarked on 16 mm. film, when Nellie entered and informed us that dinner was served. As we went to the dining room, Basil whispered to me that we might have time, after dinner, to run his films. I wondered if he was being very optimistic. We dined by the light of candles, set amongst beautiful flowers. The dinner was simple yet perfect. Basil was right. There were more room for one's eyes than one's teeth.

It was served on ruby glass plates. There were glasses to match.

It was just after we had disposed of the soup, that the Raths family really began to have a thoroughly good time. The conversation turned to food. And the fun began. Mrs. Rathbone, it appears, doesn't find much use for English cooking. In fact, she informed us with a twinkle in her eye that our English imagination in cooking began and finished with boiled potatoes. Into the frayed dished Basil, his eyes flashing.

"Where can you get Melton Mowbray pork pies, except in England?" he demanded.

"Where can you get as good roast beef and Yorkshire pudding?" enquired Rodion, a little louder.

"Then there's boiled mutton and carper sauce, and saddle of mutton and currant jelly," I squeaked, feebly.

Ouida dismissed them all, with an airy wave of her hand.

"Good, wholesome, truck-drivers' food. Did you ever taste crepes suzette murdered by an English cook? Did you ever suffer the agonies of an English omelette? Did you ever?"

"Whoever wants to live on crepes suzette or omelettes?" blared Basil.

"Give me something I can get my teeth into," trumpeted Rodion.
Gloria Dickson strikes an exotic note in “Gold Diggers in Paris.”

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