

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 "Marca Palo," and above, in "Rabin Haad."

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 thou-

sands 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?"

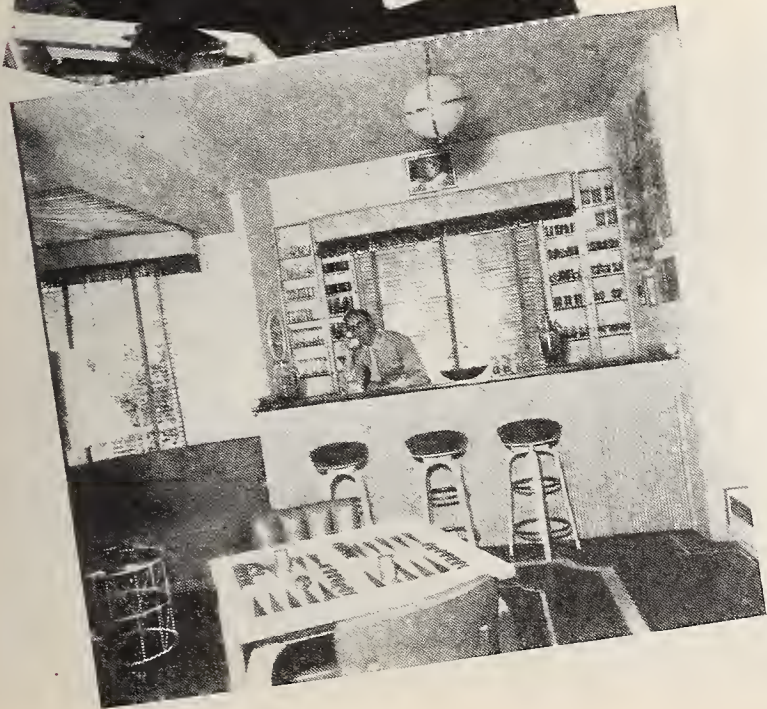
I was mumbling something which I hoped sounded enthusiastic, when Mrs. Rathbone, vivacious and pretty, came in to greet me, to bustle with brief plans for her own afternoon, to ask after Basil's plans, to hope that we would remain cheerful and good friends until she could join us before dinner. "And 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."

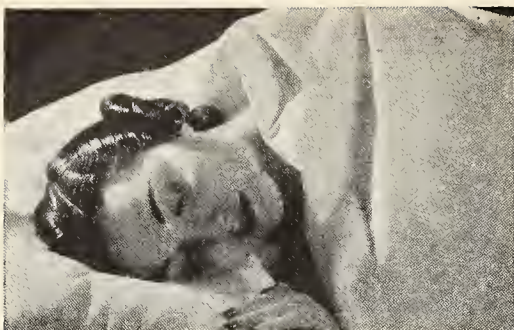
I nodded, and went across the hall to my room, where I found that Ambrose had laid out some flannel bags, a sweater, which looked almost indecently new to me, and some sports shoes. I hadn't expected to feel overdressed with this Rathbone man, but I really did wish I had a hole in something.

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*)



The beautiful Rathbone home, left above, is in Los Feliz Hills, just outside Hallywood. Center left, Basil and Mrs. Rathbone (Ouida Bergere) leading the cozy, simple life—between parties for celebrated friends. Left, the cocktail bar, and at right another corner of the Rathbone home, the library, with Basil showing his son Rodion a sword with which his uncle was knighted by King Edward VII.





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The Host of Hollywood

Continued from page 65

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 your sedentary reporter. Basil and I were keeping up a desultory 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 in 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 it came to setting up a permanent home. A writer can't live that way, and so she gave up her career. Well, since then, thanks be to my lucky stars (and motion pictures) I seem to be fairly well set, and have made it possible for us to put down 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 harness.

"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, we are dining quietly at home. And when I say dining quietly, I mean dining informally. We never dress on these occasions. As for quietness, I can't say we're *very* quiet. I do 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 can hear us for blocks. We *love* to hear ourselves talk!

"I thought, when Rodion came out, he would, maybe, have a tempering effect, but, it seems, he can raise his voice just as 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 we'll talk about, but, depend upon it, it will be something controversial. Anyhow, we'll have such a good time. At least, we Rathbones will!"

I make my weary feet work 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 tea. Made as only the English can make tea. There were no fancy little cakes, sandwiches, or other useless impedimenta. 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 own question: "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 the film.

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 I led him into 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 amongst men.

"I have a Swedish chef. He's perfectly terrific. The soups he makes! Always has an enormous stock pot on the stove, you know. And his pastries—light things 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 squab." 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. Then 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 pictures, and made my way to my 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 cocktails. Mrs. Rathbone waved me to a seat next her, and we drifted into inconsequential pleasantries. Before the fire was a tempting array of canapes. The living-room is not large. It has dark blue glass panels, before which were white flowers. It was a combination of smartness and comfort. Mrs. Rathbone was wearing a gown which was a combination of comfort and smartness; a tea-gownish kind of thing. Basil and Rodion came in, and conversation became lively. We started on dogs; we touched lightly upon the works of Smollet, Fielding, and Dickens; thence to music from Beethoven to Gershwin. We had just embarked on 16 mm. film, when Nellie entered and announced 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 optimistic.

We dined by the light of candles, set amongst beautiful flowers. The dinner was simple yet perfect. Basil was right. There *was* mushroom soup, and there *was* squab. It was served on ruby glass plates. There were glasses to match.

It was just after we had disposed of the soup that the Rathbone 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 fray dashed 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 caper 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.

Ouida eyed me with a flashing eye, challenging me to continue.

"Mrs. Rathbone," I piped, "I don't think that three hefty English males should gang up on you!"

She laughed. "Oh, I can take care of myself." And she proceeded to do so. The din increased in fury. And all the Rathbones were having a perfectly marvelous time. They love each other, these three, and this is part of their life. It wouldn't be the same without. Ouida and Basil told me separately, that these discussions were the breath of life to them. They have no time for the radio, bridge, or any other indoor game. Conversation is so much more important, and exciting. We sat over dinner until about nine-thirty, when Mrs. Rathbone rose. She had *almost* convinced me that as cooks, we English are pretty good empire builders. And so to the living-room, where we had coffee and liqueurs, and where we knocked the living daylights out of subjects from grand opera to Australian koalas. Somewhere round about midnight, Basil looked at the clock. "Great Scott! I meant to have shown you my 16 mm. pictures tonight. Well, we can do that tomorrow, sometime." I'm sure that I was convincing in my expressions of regret.

I woke, next morning, about ten o'clock, and pressed a button. In a few minutes, Nellie appeared, with a breakfast tray containing Scotch oatmeal, kippers, toast, marmalade, coffee, and a vase containing a perfect rose. As I was finishing my coffee, Basil knocked and entered. "Like a set or two of tennis, old chap? I haven't a court of my own, but Mrs. DeMille, my next door neighbor, is good enough to let me use hers, which is practically in my back-yard."

Well, we played tennis, and the less said about it, the better. Basil chased the legs off me. When I cried "Uncle!" he took



Gloria Dickson strikes an exotic note in "Gold Diggers in Paris."

on Rodion, and was hardly breathing deeply when we went in for lunch, which was chicken à la king, and a salad with a dressing that must have been made elsewhere than on earth. After lunch, Basil, Rodion, and I went to the site of the new home. It lies 1,260 feet above Hollywood. One side overlooks the San Fernando Valley, and the other side looks toward the Pacific. There are four acres, on two and a half of which there are thirty-seven

oak trees, between which wild flower seeds have already been planted. There is a fence around it, and there is a fern dell with a waterfall. Here, Basil expects to spend the rest of his days. We saw the sun set from this eyrie, a mad, red sunset that even Turner never conceived.

On our way home, I asked Basil if he expected any droppers-in; Sunday being the day that generally happens. He was emphatic in his reply: "No, I have never encouraged droppers-in. I suppose I may have offended a few people, when Nellie goes to the door and says that Mr. and Mrs. Rathbone are not at home; meaning, of course, that though we may be home, we are not receiving. We like to *expect* people. After all, everybody has a phone, and can call us."

I had to leave just before dinner, but not before I had met Basil's four guests. There were Mr. and Mrs. Fred Cavens. Fred Cavens is Basil's fencing master, and one of the men he calls friend. He is also a metaphysician. His other two guests were Mr. and Mrs. Howard Hill. Howard Hill and Basil went hunting boars with bows and arrows while on location in "Robin Hood." (Basil has pictures to prove it.) Hill was the archery expert on that picture, and made some most amazing shots.

As I was leaving, I heard Hill say, in his delightful drawl: "I think we Americans are more interested in power than bread. We have plenty of bread." As I got into my car, I heard the sounds of battle rising, and I knew that the Rathbones were about to have another perfectly splendid time.

As I drove through the gates, I saw Basil, revealed in my headlights. I stopped. "You know, old chap, you never *did* see my 16 mm. pictures. Give me a ring, and tell me when you can come."

I assured him that I certainly would.



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