

# LOVE LIFE OF A VILLAIN



*Basil Rathbone, by the star's own admission, has a secret—it's about a woman—a redhead named Ouida*

BY KIRTLEY BASKETTE

"MY secret," said Basil Rathbone, "is a woman. She is small. She is vital. She has red hair. Her name is Ouida. She is my wife.

"Without her I would be nothing; with her I can be everything. Without her I would be miserable. With her I am the happiest man in the world.

"Of course," he added, "behind the success of every man there is some woman. But it isn't often we give them any credit. That's why my confession may be a little startling. Everything I have achieved—everything I may be today or hope for tomorrow—I owe my wife, Ouida."

For an hour I listened to the most amazing earnest tribute to a Hollywood wife I had ever heard.

It came from a man who is viewed throughout the world as the very incarnation of conceit and masculine arrogance.

The epitome of self-confidence on the screen, he revealed himself as emancipated from a blighting inferiority complex only by the patient love of his wife. Celebrated as a charming conversationalist, he confessed to a tongue-tied ineptitude until she brought him out of it. Respected as a shrewd career man, he revealed how a woman had launched that career, steered it, and secured it—at the sacrifice of her own.

He did all this eagerly, humbly, happily.

WE talked of a perfect marriage, oddly enough, in the house where a prize fighter, Jack Dempsey, had once lived in stormy domesticity with his former wife, Estelle Taylor. It was in the calm of a lovely evening. The Los Feliz Hills above Hollywood were blue and the air soft. Everything in the setting suggested a prelude to a pleasant story. Basil Rathbone, just in from a romp with his six dogs, brimmed with good nature. Somehow, Basil always reminds me of a race horse, lean, long, nervous, trim. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke to the ceiling. He talks fast and with an electric charm.

"I haven't told this before," he said, "but right now it seems particularly timely. Because, rightly or wrongly, Ouida considers her job with me done now. She thinks I am established at last and capable of looking after myself. She feels she can relax now and return to writing, the career she abandoned to see me through. And



For what she has done for Rodion, his son (top, second left); for what she has done for his career and for the man himself, Sir Guy of "Robin Hood" sheds his screen villainy to pay humble homage to the lady of his heart

it was she who saw me through—because, if I hadn't met my wife, I honestly don't know what would have happened to me, for until then my life had had no direction. Certainly, I could never have caught on to Hollywood without her.

"I wonder how many of us here in Hollywood would be where we are without the help of some woman who loves us. Think of the tremendous influence Dixie Lee Crosby has had on Bing. Of the vast importance of Bella Muni to her extremely talented and sensitive husband, Paul. There are dozens of cases—and you don't have

to stop in Hollywood, of course.

"It's even intriguing to wonder just how great some historic figures would have been without their wives. Disraeli, Napoleon, Washington. Can you imagine Robert Browning without Elizabeth Barrett?"

"But speaking of the Rathbones . . ." I interrupted.

Basil smiled. "Right!" he said. "I'm getting out of my district.

"Well—Ouida came into my life two years  
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# Love Life of a Villain

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before I met her . . ." And thus began this inspirational love story in which the screen's prime villain plays a major rôle.

It was in the winter of 1921. Basil Rathbone was playing in "The Czarina" on Broadway. In one matinee audience sat two women. As the tall, dark, attractive English actor strode on the stage, one of the women turned to the other and said, "There is the man I'd like to be my husband." Two years later they met at a party. They fell in love at once and were married.

"What Ouida saw in me then, I don't know," confessed Basil. "But looking back, I can tell you what I see in myself. I was a man living from day to day and perfectly content in doing it. I had no plans, few ambitions. I had come back from the war, where life had been like a long, terrible dream. At the front I had never thought about what would happen or why. There was no past and no future. Nights were either wet nights or dry nights. The important things to me then were whether my billet was warm or cold, the food good or rotten.

"I suppose when you meet death daily for a long time you give up trying to order things. I came out of the war comparatively untouched. That is, I wasn't shell-shocked or scarred up. But I had lost all sense of life's realities.

"I found I was still a good enough actor. I got some good parts in London. Whatever they offered me, I took. Money meant nothing to me. I never thought of getting ahead. I never cared about it.

"Somehow I expected to be taken care of—as I had been in the army. I shrank from decisions. I never went after things I wanted. I hated any sort of battle or argument. I just wanted to be let alone—to vegetate. I was completely negative."

It was hard to believe the words I heard. Basil Rathbone, one of the most positive personalities in Hollywood, branding himself as a negative, shrinking soul!

"I remember how shocked I was," he continued, "at something that happened in London. Perhaps it prepared me a little for Ouida's influence, later to bear fruit. I had had a bit of London success in a series of plays that John Barrymore did in New York, notably 'Peter Ibbetson.' When Barrymore's latest Broadway hit, 'The Jest,' came to London, I naturally expected to play it. In fact, I counted on it heavily. But I made no effort to get the part. It never occurred to me they wouldn't offer it to me. Such a thing seemed out of the question. Well—it wasn't. Someone else did it, and I was stunned. But still the lesson didn't sink in.

"I was still in this semi-helpless, negative state when I married Ouida. She made me positive.

"I'll never forget her as I first saw her. Everything about her was definite. The way she looked, the way she talked. She was completely opposite to me. I was indefinite. I fell in love with her on the spot. I have never fallen out of love.

"Ouida taught me some very important things at once: that you are as important as you make yourself; that you must have respect for yourself or no one will respect you; that an actor, particularly, must be aggressive; that it's all very well to expect and accept breaks and good fortune, but it's not



Last year the Rathbones gave a memorable "Bride and Groom" party. This year the real thing took place in the garden of the Rathbone home when Rodion, son of Basil, married attractive Caroline Blake Fisher, dramatic student. The wedding party, left to right: Mrs. Rathbone, Mrs. Cedric Frances, Constance Collier, the bride and bridegroom, Walter Wurdeman, Cedric Frances and Basil Rathbone

enough. You must back yourself up.

"My wife was Ouida Bergere before we were married. She was a successful screen writer. Paramount was paying her a thousand dollars a week, so I think you might say she was well along on her career. The day she married me she quit writing, abandoned her career. Or rather changed it. For twelve years, Ouida's career has been—me.

"She was a practical woman then, as she is now. She knew first that there should be only one pay check in a family. Two pay checks mean two separate lives. If she continued her work she would have to be in Hollywood, while my interests were still on the stage in New York. She said, 'If you are very much in love with something, you must be with it. I can't write in Hollywood when you are in New York. So I won't write!'

"But I think she knew, too, that the job of making me over would take all of her time and energy. I was a pretty hopeless case."

Basil Rathbone laughed. "Frankly, I suffered from the worst inferiority complex Dr. Freud ever imagined. I had no assurance whatsoever. Conversations with people terrified me. I was a social flop *par excellence*—you know, the kind of chap who sits by himself at

parties and says 'Yes' and 'No' or perhaps 'Really?' when he's spoken to. I didn't let myself express my thoughts. I was too afraid. In spite of my years and all I had gone through, I was actually timid with people.

"It must have been bad, because it was so obvious. Every fortuneteller I ever went to spotted it at once. They invariably told me I was dangerously lacking in the 'civic side,' as they sometimes called it, or the 'social side.' They always said my social outlets were dammed up by fear. That was before 'complexes' were popular.

"Developing that 'social side' of me has been one of the hardest jobs my wife or anyone ever faced, I'm sure. I am naturally a shy person, but she knew how important such a side is to everyone—not only an actor, but a doctor, lawyer, writer, businessman. So she set about it.

"She did it very cleverly. She did not demand much of me in the way of social activity. But Ouida made me enjoy the times we did go out or entertain. She brought me in contact with interesting people. She drew me out and turned the conversation to me. I can hear her now saying, 'What do you think about it, Basil?' I'd have to speak up then, and, with a little encourage-

ment, I soon found myself talking and liking it."

I had to smile. In Hollywood today the Rathbones are celebrated as hosts. They move mostly in the circle of picture people interested in the arts. The Max Reinhardts, the Edward G. Robinsons, the Henry Blankes, the Charles Boyers are among their intimate friends. When Basil and his wife entertain, it's very much of an event, too. Hollywood has seldom seen a party to match the costume affair they gave celebrating their eleventh wedding anniversary last year. It was a brilliant event, and I said so.

"I'm glad you mentioned that," said Basil. "I think it was a grand party, too, and I can say so because I come to my own parties as a guest. Ouida does it all and when Ouida does anything she does it right.

"But she never overdoes it. It is only because what she attempts is done so well that it's remembered. She still demands little of me in the way of social activity. We are at home three hundred nights in the year, easily. That is because the home that Ouida has woven about me is so attractive to us both that neither of us wishes to be anywhere else.

"I do not like to play the often quite despicable characters I do. To be convincing, I have to summon up such unpleasant thoughts and feelings. I am frequently worn out and discouraged after a day with them at the studio.

"But when I come home in the evening it is to a home that has been created about me and in which I feel at once happy. My wife has a quality of relaxation and assurance about her which immediately restores me. She is small but colorful, dainty but strong. She always reminds me of a Goya painting. I draw new life from her."

It was getting dark. Basil Rathbone reached up and snapped on the light.

"No," he protested, "don't go yet. Let me tell you of Ouida's latest gift to me. I think it is the finest thing I have ever known. She has brought me back my son, Rodion. He is the son of my first wife. We have been separated since 1919. He is here now, living with us, working in the technical department at Warner Brothers, and loving it. Ouida did it alone. Unknown to me, she made friends with Marian, my former wife. She wrote my boy in England and made friends with him, too. She brought us together again, and now my happiness is complete. And I owe this, as I owe everything, to her."

We were shaking hands. The glow of the lamp revealed the strong, good features in Basil Rathbone's sensitive face.

"You can see," he said, "that for a thousand reasons I owe my wife a debt of gratitude I can never repay. The least I can do is give her the credit. Because of Ouida, life to me is intensely enjoyable. She has helped me live in an age of super-realities and at the same time to hold onto my dreams—which she loves as dearly as I do—and as I love her."

He looked away into the dusk. "I think," he said, "a great many Hollywood husbands might say the same thing—if they would."

"Or if they could," I suggested. Then I left, thinking what a really bitter travesty on Hollywood it is that a man of Basil Rathbone's warm and sentimental soul should be known all over as a cruel, black-hearted villain.



Among the wedding guests were Ruth Waterbury, Norma Shearer and Merle Oberon