



# Rathbone Wanted To Be A Hero

When film scouts saw him playing Romeo on the stage and asked him to go to Hollywood, Basil Rathbone thought they would give him romantic rôles. They made him a villain instead, but J. M. RUDDY reveals him as a very charming one.

Basil Rathbone with his wife, Ouida Bergere, who used to make silent films. (Above) Practising duelling for his part of Tybalt in "Romeo and Juliet."

PERHAPS it is a tribute to an actor when you expect to find him the same off the screen. You have formed your impressions from his film portrayals and fleeting glimpses at previews and parties. Yet how misleading these impressions can be.

A case in point is Basil Rathbone. His recent parts as the implacable, inflexible Mr. Murdstone in *David Copperfield*; the stern domineering husband of Greta Garbo in *Anna Karenina*; Le Duc d'Evremonde in *A Tale of Two Cities*; the French pirate Levasseur in *Captain Blood*, to name a few, made me consider him a man of sardonic humour, relentless argument and pungent observation.

It was a pleasant surprise to find that Mr. Rathbone is a man of parts, generous in his appreciation, kindly in his regard of mankind, an idealist rather than a cynic.

## Rarely Smiles

We were lunching in his dressing-room at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. He is in *Romeo and Juliet* in the rôle of the fiery, furious Tybalt.

He is tall, just over six feet. Sinewy in build, he gives evidence of an unexpected strength. He is distinguished in appearance with a patrician air which he wears lightly. His face is strong and very expressive of his moods and thoughts. The eyes are of fine quality, hazel in tone, deeply set under heavy lids. He smiles rarely, but always with his eyes first.

"Right-o, we'll turn back the years quickly," he complied with my request that he might tell me of his youth and early days in the theatre.

"Johannesburg was my birth place. Father, of English and Scots parentage, was a mining engineer on the goldfields. Mother was born in Dublin. Left South Africa when I was about seven, on my birthday, too, June 13 and we lived in Liverpool for a while. After prep. school I went to Repton.

"At school I was pretty good at running and

for one brief day I held the record for the six hundred yards. Collected eleven cups, but my great enthusiasm was for writing plays. Laboriously on the school foolscap I wrote a few awful things for the school dramatic club. But paternal plans were otherwise. At nineteen I was sent to the Cornhill branch of an insurance company, of which my uncle was general manager."

Basil Rathbone smiled musingly. "Perhaps, like so many of us, I did not quite know what I wanted to express at that time. There was the urge, yes. If I could live my life again, it's pleasant to toy with the thought that I might compose music.

"Finally, after a year in the insurance business, I went to interview my cousin, Sir Frank Benson. I asked him for a job. For weeks I had studied the scene between Shylock, Salanio and Salarino. 'Well, what can you do?' he asked me. That was my cue. I plunged into it, doing each part. It was right. It had to be. My Shylock was magnificent. The scene over, Sir Frank looked at me quizzically. 'Basil, some men have an ability to judge horses. I am supposed to know something about actors. I think, with persistent study, hard work and unswerving application, you may become an actor!'

"I joined his second company on tour, beginning at Ipswich, at the princely sum of £1 per week. But what training! And what fun it was. I learned my Shakespeare indeed. There were no family favours conferred on me. Sir Frank was, if anything, harder on me because I was related. My rebukes were severe when necessary.

"I joined the Liverpool Scottish and emerged, on demobilization, as a subaltern. I went back into stage harness and, while doing Romeo at the Stratford Festival, Constance Collier spotted me and offered me the title rôle of *Peter Ibbetson* in the play. From 1920 onwards I was on Broadway or the West End until, six years ago, I came to Hollywood for *The Last of Mrs. Cheyne*. You will recall that Norma Shearer was the star."

Hollywood at that time was not fully aware of his acting ability, except as a suave sophisticate. So to the stage he returned. Finally there came an eminently successful tour with the great American star, Katharine Cornell. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Candida* were outstanding opportunities for Rathbone's talent.

"Scores of the film magnates came to see us. I said to my wife that here at last they could see my work—that I was versatile, that I was not

necessarily a heavy, but a character romantic actor."

He laughed heartily. "You have to learn how to take it if you work in pictures. While I was enjoying a holiday in the lovely woods of Connecticut, my agent 'phoned me to offer me the rôle of Murdstone. At first, I refused. But, as you know, I did it. Since then I have been steadily working in Hollywood.

"Tybalt is enjoyable. At any rate I am getting lots of practice in fencing and, funnily enough, putting on weight doing it. The work brings back memories of days with the Benson company when fencing was a fundamental part of our training."

## His Ninth Juliet

Norma Shearer is his ninth Juliet. What does he think of her? A delicate question, yes, yet worthy of his consideration.

"At the rehearsals with George Cukor, the director, when we all sat around a long table and read the script, I was at once interested in her handling of the lovely lines and the beautiful speeches. At once I felt that she had something, that she was living the part, that she understood completely Shakespeare's Juliet.

"One day in particular, I was coming on to the set with Reginald Denny, who plays Benvolio, and John Barrymore, Mercutio. We noticed there were screens around the camera and the principals who were rehearsing finally before doing the scene. . . . We stopped and listened. It was thrilling. It was a delicious experience just to hear the words, those golden phrases delivered as if Juliet herself were speaking them.

"I was so impressed that I wrote her a little note congratulating her on her rendering of the lines."

At home in his timbered rambling Tudor house in the Los Feliz Park, a few miles from the studios, Basil Rathbone is a charming host, with his wife, the former Ouida Bergere, a talented, brilliant woman, who wrote, produced, and acted in many successes of the silent era.

Golf, tennis and gardening are his pursuits. Dogs are his passion; two cockers, a Springer and an Irish setter having the run of the place.

The Rathbones enjoy people who talk and discuss, who have ideas and viewpoints. Their small dinners are great fun. Their big garden parties always enjoyable. The actor feels that at last he has everything he wants, with a plan of summers in England ahead. In short, a rounded life for any man.