

# Rathbone's Finest Hour

by Pat Ward ("The Ming Saucer")

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Our Feature Article for this month was authored by Pat Ward, a friend of ours from The Illustrious Clients of Indianapolis scion society.

This article originally appeared in the *Illustrious Client's News*, Vol. XX, No. 4 for August 1997 and Pat wrote it in preparation for The Clients' August 9, 1997 summer film festival in which the 1939 film version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was featured.

Mr. Terrence Faherty, noted authority on Basil Rathbone, was the featured speaker for the occasion.

When we first read Pat's article we were very impressed with her knowledge and erudition concerning the Mr. Rathbone and the 1939 film version of *The Hound*.

We asked Pat if we could, at a later date, use her essay as the Feature Article for this web site.

She graciously gave her permission.

In addition to being a fine writer and orator, Ms. Ward was a contributing editor to *The Sherlock Holmes Review* during that journal's tenure of publication, and she holds the position of "The Ming Saucer" with the Illustrious Clients of Indianapolis.

We are grateful to Pat for allowing us to reprint her most interesting article here.

The 1997 Illustrious Clients Filmfest will feature a salute to one of the greatest of the Great Detective's impersonators.

Noted author and fellow Hoosier Terrence Faherty will give a presentation on the career of Basil Rathbone.

Illustrating his talk with video clips of Rathbone's many roles, Mr. Faherty will survey the varied and successful career of this talented actor.

If you only know Rathbone from his outings as The Great Detective, then you *really don't know Rathbone!* In addition to being a nationally renowned author, Mr. Faherty is a Rathbone aficionado, and has agreed to share his insights with us.

Afterwards, we will present what is arguably Rathbone's best turn as Sherlock Holmes: the 1939 version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

*The Hound* marks the first performance of Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce in the roles of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson.

Although Rathbone would later express considerable reservations about the part of Holmes, he initially approached the role with great enthusiasm.

As *The Hound* began filming in 1938, Rathbone told an interviewer: "I think that Holmes is one of the greatest characters in fiction."

With all the thousands of detective and mystery stories that have been

written since, the name of Sherlock Holmes still stands at the head of the roster of famous sleuths.

It is synonymous with the very word "detective."

To play such a character means as much to me as ten Hamlets.

Rathbone's excitement about the part undoubtedly came from the fact it offered him a respite from his career as a screen villain.

It also gave the actor an opportunity to play a leading role in an "A" picture.

The result is that *The Hound* presents what is arguably Rathbone's best work as Holmes, with the actor superbly depicting

Holmes as a man of reason and action.

Rathbone is ably assisted in this film by Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson.

There are elements of Bruce's later "Boobus Britannicus Filmicus" in this film, but for the most part both Bruce and the screenplay present a capable and loyal Watson.

For those whose only experience with Bruce's Watson comes from the later films produced by Universal, his work in *The Hound* may come as a revelation.

This picture was the first screen adaptation of a Sherlock Holmes story specifically set in the late-19th Century time period of the Canon.

Of course, this late Victorian England was actually the 20th Century Fox back lot, which offered a particularly sanitized version of that time and place, but Fox did give *The Hound* lavish production values.

The huge recreation of the Great Grimpen Mire, which was filmed on an indoor set, was reportedly so large that Richard Greene, the actor playing Sir Henry Baskerville, once became lost on it.

The supporting cast contained many of Hollywood's best character actors, including not one, but two possible red herrings in John Carradine and Lionel Atwill.

Atwill, who portrayed Dr. Mortimer, was to later play Professor Moriarty opposite Rathbone in one of the Universal films, and Carradine, the father of Carradines David, Keith, and

Robert, had already played so many bad guys that audience probably suspected him the minute his name appeared in the credits.

The film also marked the first appearance of Mary Gordon as Mrs. Hudson, the grandmother of all Mrs. Hudson's.

This *Hound* is not perfect.

Director Sidney Lanfield, who would later direct many episodes of television's *The Addams Family*, paced the film very slowly, and the lack of music at several key points is keenly felt.

The screenplay by Ernest Pascal omitted several events and characters from the novel, most notably Laura Lyons; and added others, such as the seance conducted by Mrs. Mortimer.

Although Atwill gives an excellent performance, his creepy Dr. Mortimer, peering suspiciously through his coke-bottle glasses, is a far cry from Conan Doyle's genial general practitioner.

Barrymore the butler was changed to Barryman, reportedly to avoid confusion with the famous acting family.

The name change made little difference; Carradine's performance is as grave and stately as the novel's character.

Other changes from the book appear to have been made in order to make the attraction between Sir Henry Baskerville and Beryl Stapleton more appealing.

In this adaptation, Miss Stapleton, played winningly by Wendy Barrie,

is not merely *posing* as Stapleton's sister, and she has no knowledge of his plans.

At the time *The Hound* was being filmed Richard Greene was one of 20th Century Fox's rising young leading men and his part as Sir Henry Baskerville was beefed up as a result.

Greene even received top billing ahead of Basil Rathbone in the film's publicity.

The young actor, who would later portray Robin Hood in a 1960s television series, gave a competent and likeable performance, but audiences knew that Rathbone as Holmes was the real star.

Perhaps the only disappointing performance in this version of *The Hound* was the actor in the title role.

*The Hound* was portrayed by Chief, an amiable 140-pound Great Dane, found, after an exhaustive talent search, at a kennel in the San Fernando Valley.

Chief was big and imposing, but not up to the task of portraying Conan Doyle's "Hound from Hell."

The canine equivalent of a Karloff, a Lugosi, an Atwill, or even a Rathbone was apparently not available.

The 1939 adaptation of *The Hound* gained a rather notorious reputation over the years.

For a variety of legal reasons, the film was not in general release for many years.

A rumor began that the reason behind this was that the film dealt with Holmes' drug use in some daring manner.

In 1975, in the midst of the great Seventies Holmes boom and at least partly fueled by this rumor *The Hound's* legal problems were resolved and the movie

enjoyed a limited re-release in theaters.

The film was welcomed by many critics, who found it an entertaining example of Hollywood film-making at its best.

Those who rushed to see it hoping for an examination of Holmes'

cocaine use were disappointed, however, for the film alludes to it directly only in the last line of the film.

While this line did cause some difficulties with the censors in 1939 and producer Darryl F. Zanuck did have to fight to keep it in the film, it hardly seems worth all the fuss.

