

# Juliet I HAVE KNOWN

by

*Basil Rathbone*



Norma Shearer . . . he had dreamed of such a Juliet

IT IS August 1913 in Stratford-on-Avon. I stand at the stage door of the old Memorial Theatre. Looking down into the river I see myself dressed in a black costume of the 15th Century and holding in my arms a large bouquet of big white calla lilies. In a few minutes I shall lay my flowers at Juliet's tomb, cross swords with Romeo and, in the rule of Paris, pass into the records of my beloved profession, humbly taking my place in the history of the Stratford Festivals.

From upstream the river comes to me like a song I must have heard in some other life of a deep longing. Slowly and sweetly it is passing under the bridge bearing on its cool breast two proud white swans. They glide by me, and on down stream past Stratford Church, the burial place of William Shakespeare whom, God rest, has given me this most exquisite moment of realization.

My "call" comes and I go into the theatre and up onto the stage. On a bier, lighted by four tall candles lies Juliet, my first Juliet whom I love with all my heart and to whom I hardly ever speak, except in my part, for fear she shall break my dream. She never did. Even now I never think of her as Dorothy Green but as my first Juliet.



BASIL RATHBONE

● ONE YEAR LATER! Malvern Wostershire. I am dressed in red and gold. I am standing in Juliet's garden looking up at her as she steps out onto her balcony to commune with me and with the night which is so completely ours, and ours alone, despite the presence of a large audience. Where are you today, my second Juliet? You had a soft and gentle loveliness that I like to remember.

There is a town somewhere in the northern part of England. I can see it clearly in my mind's eye but, for the life of me, I cannot recall its name. However, "what's in a name: a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." So let it be. It is time to go to the theatre. A deep glow from the setting sun gives this smoky city an illusive loveliness that I am sure reality denies it!

I wanted to play Romeo so very [Continued on page 61]

Romeo and Juliet are old friends of Basil Rathbone . . . he having played Romeo more than 500 times on the stage . . . wide-shouldered and narrow-hipped, Rathbone looks trim in tights . . . in the screen version he plays the rôle of Tibalt, cousin of Juliet, a fiery hot-headed young duelist who is ultimately killed by Romeo (Leslie Howard) . . . to become thoroughly proficient, he duelled daily for 80 days before production began, and is as handy with the rapier as he is with the pen . . . this story was written by Rathbone expressly for HOLLYWOOD



Here's Leo Carrillo aboard his yacht, *The Thetis*, vacationing after his latest Columbia picture, *If You Could Only Cook*

## Juliets I Have Known

(Continued from page thirty-two)

much that night. My whole being seemed tuned for the exquisite experience. I was very happy and very excited and very sad. I remember that I wanted to cry and that I did!

This Juliet was my third. I can't remember her name. Perhaps that is the greatest compliment I can pay her. I thought of her as Juliet. She had dark eyes and a very white skin and very dark hair; she was very beautiful. She lived in Verona. What does it matter that she had some other name than Juliet on a programme, that people bought and handled and threw away after the performance was over, only to remember, as I did, that she was Juliet!

● IN AUGUST 1919—after some soldiering in France I returned to Stratford to play Romeo again. It was to be my first Romeo in Stratford and Joyce Carey was my fourth Juliet. Of all my experiences in the theatre these performances of *Romeo and Juliet* in August, 1919, were the most complete I have ever known.

Joyce was nineteen at the time, I think—a lovely child whose Juliet had a piquant expectancy about it that I had never met before. We saw a great deal of each other and lived in an atmosphere of the play, walking together on moonlight nights over to Shottery where Shakespeare had courted Ann Hathaway, or we would seek the seclusion of the willow laden river banks or the silent inspiring little streets of Stratford herself. (The whole town, with the exception of ourselves, slept soundly long before midnight!)

● ON THE AFTERNOON before our first performance, we picked as many flowers as we could carry and walked with them to Shakespeare's grave where

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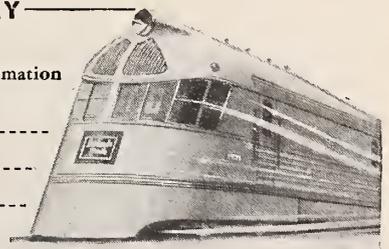
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we left them. Many, many years after, many people who saw our performance of *Romeo and Juliet* on that occasion spoke of it lovingly, and especially of this Juliet.

I was not to meet my next Juliet until 1934. She was Katharine Cornell, whose successful season on the road and in New York made theatrical history. Certainly, not in my time, did any other actress on the stage have so complete a success as Juliet as did Katharine Cornell.

But, December 9, 1935, was reserved for me to see and hear my ideal Juliet. On this date we foregathered on a rehearsal stage at M-G-M studios to start work on the picturization of the play. A notable company, Leslie Howard, John Barrymore, Edna Mae Oliver, Reginald Denny and Norma Shearer. As the rehearsal proceeded, I became aware of a bewildering loveliness in Miss Shearer's Juliet that, with all my admiration for her, I had not expected to encounter.

● I HAD DREAMED of such a Juliet but had not thought it possible that I would ever see and hear her in the flesh. At her first entrance I was abruptly arrested by a pathos in the simplicity and tenderness of her approach that soon developed into an *emotional* reaction from me that was most surely Shakespeare's intention as to audience reaction. I am, at most times, analytical to a fault. But here I found no desire to analyze, merely a deep and sincere gratitude for a glimpse into the heart and soul of Shakespeare's truest heroine, Juliet.

In the balcony scene there was no apparently preconceived idea of a musical interlude in the play—the scene was lived. I believed it all and still it was ever and always music to my ears—the tragic music of the overture to Juliet's great love. The potion scene, even when well played, usually has a quality of theatricalism, that it seems hard to eradicate. Not so in Norma's.

With her the scene has a deliberate consciousness of the nearness of other members of the household, and a fearful expectancy of calamitous results developed finally to a deep, simple and sincere acceptance of the happy medium of returning her to her loved one. There is in this scene with Miss Shearer a bewildering mixture of that Juliet, still a child and so afraid, and that Juliet approaching the maturity of full womanhood through the great experience of her sublime faith in her love. I was and still am a little overwhelmed, as one ever is, thank God, in the presence to true beauty which, if I may, I will call Truth.

● A FEW DAYS AGO I met Miss Agnes De Mille, who is creating all the dances for *Romeo and Juliet*. She seemed highly elated about something—and it was just this: that in Miss Shearer she had found a Juliet of such intelligent simplicity and grace that the quite difficult dances that she had created for Juliet were proving no problem, but a source of real inspiration.

Miss De Mille told me that Miss Shearer was accomplishing things it often took a skilled dancer as long, if not longer, to do. This consistency of accomplishment in every department of her work together with the simple and intelligent understanding of the character of Juliet is what I believe is going to give us (her audience) as remarkably beautiful and truthful performance as has ever been portrayed on the screen.

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