

Holmes On Screen

By Bob Byrne

I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere

In the days before cinema took firm hold of the entertainment seeking public, stage plays were the major source of work for actors of all levels. Arthur Wontner was the last film Holmes before Basil Rathbone laid claim to the role. But as we'll see below, Wontner's stage career would directly and indirectly cross paths with many Sherlockian-related performers.

In the late 1890's, a young Wontner served in Louis Calvert's theater troupe (the great Eille Norwood was also a member at one time). Both would also perform at different times for Edward Compton. In 1906, Wontner played Raffles (Norwood, John Barrymore), the gentleman thief created by E.W. Hornung, Arthur Conan Doyle's brother-in-law.

Wontner first worked with Lyn Harding (who twice appeared opposite him in films as Professor Moriarty) at the Shakespeare Festival in 1910. In 1912 he played Orsino (Basil Rathbone) in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Also in the cast was Dennis Neilson-Terry (Holmes in Doyle's play, *The Crown Diamond*) and Felix Aylmer (Holmes in the 1933 play, *The Holmeses of Baker Street*).

In 1913, he played Hilary Cutts in *The New Sin*. Norwood would play the part the very next year. And in 1916, Wontner portrayed an enduring villain, *Peter Pan's* Captain Hook. The role would be shared with two screen Moriarty's, Ernest Torrence and Harding. That same year, Wontner appeared in the movie, *Frailty*, which also included Norwood in the cast!

In 1920, Wontner went into management and was involved in several plays. They were not overwhelmingly successful and thankfully for Holmes fans, he returned to the stage. In 1922 he was cast as Detective Anderson in Mary Robert Rinehart's mystery play, *The Bat*. This was a hugely successful play based upon her earlier novel, *The Circular Staircase*. Largely forgotten today, it was one of the most popular plays of its time and Wontner was the male lead.

He continued to appear in the UK and America throughout the twenties; there were always parts available for Arthur Wontner. It is unlikely that New York theatergoers, attending *The Captive* in September of 1926, realized they were seeing two future great Holmes' when Wontner and Rathbone shared the same stage! In 1924, Wontner appeared in *The Ware Case*. His own future Watson, Ian Fleming, would make his film debut in the same story in 1928 (albeit in a different role. Clive Brook later filmed it as well).

In 1930 he played one of history's greatest villains, Cardinal Richelieu (H.A. Saintsbury, Raymond Massey, Christopher Lee) in *The Three Musketeers*. Following that play, he was cast as detective *Sexton Blake*. It was directly from that role that he would go on to play the greatest of all detectives in *The Sleeping Cardinal*.

In 1934, between Holmes films, he was Pontius Pilate in the play *Good Friday*. Rathbone would follow in a filmed version the following year. Later that year Wontner played King Louis XI (Rathbone, Saintsbury).

Wontner focused on movies for the rest of his career, with occasional appearances in plays. He filmed *Blanche Fury* in 1947, appearing with future Holmes Stewart Granger. His last film came in 1955. *Three Cases of Murder* included Andre Morrell, who would play a non Nigel Bruce-like Watson opposite Peter Cushing.

Clive Brook, Raymond Massey, Robert Rendel and Reginald Owen had all made undistinguished "talkies" featuring Holmes. Brook's first effort (he made two Holmes films) was the most commercially successful, but beyond a doubt it was Wontner who came closest to the realization of Doyle's creation.

For Twickenham, it was certainly an inspired choice. As Wontner had said himself, "People had remarked so frequently, 'You really ought to play Sherlock Holmes. I've never seen anyone so like Sidney Paget's drawings.'" In fact, Wontner was Joseph Simpson's drawing for *The Red Circle* come to life. About his casting, Wontner said:

I knew the stories very well. You couldn't say I was an expert or anything like that, but I liked them very much, and it helped with getting the dialogue right. I found quite a lot of dialogue in the stories that we were able to use...I was keen to see that the dialogue was authentic.

The Sleeping Cardinal

The Sleeping Cardinal (retitled *The Fatal Hour* in America) included elements of *The Empty House* and *The Final Problem*, though having Moriarty, rather than Colonel Moran, fire from the empty house is certainly a non-Canonical change.

Watson was played by Ian Fleming (no, not the creator of James Bond). He was to play the part in four of Wontner's five Holmes films. Fleming comes across as rather harmless and lightweight. He doesn't add any heft to the role. Fleming's portrayal feels more proper for a Thin Man film than as the good doctor. He did not provide the comic relief seen when Nigel Bruce took on the role, but neither did he contribute much on-screen. There is no real chemistry between he and Wontner.

Norman McKinnell was the nefarious Professor Moriarty. He would be replaced by Lyn Harding for the final two films in the series.

The film was a success both critically and commercially, not only in Great Britain but America as well. In those pre-Oscar days, it won the New York Critics' Cinema Prize as the best mystery drama. American reviews included such praise as:

- "...Sherlock Holmes' *Fatal Hour*...is one of the best of the English films to be shown this side of the Atlantic." and
- "Sherlock Holmes' *Fatal Hour* is so smooth, so beautifully timed and acted, that there is nothing to criticize adversely."

It is interesting to note that Twickenham, who could certainly have used the money, did not reap a windfall from the film's success. Warner Brothers handled the UK distribution for the film. Apparently Twickenham did not expect much of *The Sleeping Cardinal* in America and sold the distribution rights to a subsidiary (First Division Pictures) for only 800 pounds.

Picturegoer Weekly said "...Wontner's rendering of Sherlock Holmes is wholly convincing, even to the smallest mannerisms."

The Missing Rembrandt

Realizing that they had a hot property, Twickenham quickly filmed a second Wontner project, *The Missing Rembrandt*. The source material was much closer to the original tale chosen; this time, *Charles Augustus Milverton*. The villain, however, is Baron von Guntermann, and he is not only a blackmailer, but also an art thief (thus, the title). Presumably the plot was expanded because the original short story didn't provide enough substance for an extended length film. The Granada folks would discover this problem a half century later. Unfortunately, there is no known surviving print of *The Missing Rembrandt*.

The Sign of Four

Oddly enough, Twickenham did not have either Wontner or Holmes under contract, so even before the actor had begun shooting *Rembrandt*, he had signed a contract to make a version of *The Sign of Four* for Associated Radio Pictures. A soon as he finished his Twickenham film, Wontner began shooting *Sign*,

which was shot in England, but with an American producer, Rowland V. Lee. Lee had a superhero conception of Holmes:

He was a MAN! Humorous – what sense of comedy; strong – look how fought the great Moriarty; athletic – remember how he ran after the Hound of the Baskervilles? What a MAN!

This was the only Holmes film that Wontner was to make with a reasonable budget. It was also the one in which he was most physically active. Gone was the introspective pipe smoker. The boat chase upon the Thames has quite a different ending; more like something from the 1960's Batman television show. Basil Rathbone fans can trace a bit of their energetic favorite back to this Wontner film.

Ian Hunter replaced Ian Fleming as Watson, the producers feeling that a more romantic man was needed to woo Mary Morstan. Hunter played a goofy, love-addled sidekick and served as a preview of Nigel Bruce. Fortunately he would not be cast again as Watson.

Picturegoer magazine said of Wontner, "Arthur Wontner, is as usual, a perfect Holmes."

Arthur Wontner had made three Sherlock Holmes films: *The Sleeping Cardinal*, *The Missing Rembrandt* and *The Sign of the Four*. He would do the deerstalker twice more. Unfortunately, the remaining films would not compare favorably with the first two.

The Triumph of Sherlock Holmes

The next film, *The Triumph of Sherlock Holmes*, came in 1934, from Real Art Productions. This was actually Twickenham under a new name. Wontner returned to his more sedate impersonation. The film was a reasonably faithful adaptation of *The Valley of Fear*.

Reviews of Wontner's work were still positive, as reflected in this one from *The Monthly Bulletin*:

"Arthur Wontner is the only Sherlock Holmes. His playing throughout is in perfect character and he seems to have walked straight out of the Sidney Paget illustrations which made Sherlock Holmes universally recognizable."

A notable improvement occurs at the beginning of the movie. Holmes is retiring and 221B Baker Street is in a state of disarray, although the thought of that esteemed address being nothing more than Watson's medical office seems wrong. Moriarty (played by Lyn Harding) is still at large and pays a visit to the great detective. The filmmakers then give us a recreation of the classic exchange from *The Final Problem*. It is a wonderful scene. Of course, it had also been used, almost exactly alike, in *The Sleeping Cardinal*! Why mess with what works?

Like *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes is absent for much of *The Valley of Fear* because of long flashback sequences set in America. However, *Triumph* does not seem to suffer from Birdie Edwards' carrying a significant part of the narration. There is a major deviation from the original novel when Moriarty rushes to Birlstone Manor, flees up a ruined tower to escape and is shot by Holmes, after which he plunges to his death. Except of course, he appears in the next Wontner film!

Lyn Harding had created quite a niche for himself in playing villains opposite Holmes. In 1910, Doyle's play *The House of Temperley* folded. Stuck with a long-term lease and no production, Doyle turned to Sherlock Holmes to stave off financial disaster. He adapted *The Speckled Band* into a play and ended up with a valuable property that more than paid for itself and *Temperley*. Harding was chosen to play the evil Dr. Grimesby Rylott. Harding received rave reviews, though by more modern standards he was quite an over-actor. Though popular with the playgoers, it was certainly not the Moriarty of Doyle's stories.

Harding reprised the role in Massey's filmed version of the play, which is still available today. Again, compliments were paid to Wontner's work:

Kinematograph Weekly – 'excellent...exceedingly fascinating...great.'

Monthly Film Bulletin – "Arthur Wontner is the only Sherlock Holmes. His playing throughout is in perfect character and he seems to have walked straight out of the Sidney Paget illustrations. "

Picturegoer Weekly – "Arthur Wontner is a perfect Sherlock Holmes."

Silver Blaze

Wontner made his fifth and final film as Sherlock Holmes in 1937. It is justly considered the weakest of the series. Perhaps again feeling that there simply wasn't enough source material in the original short story, a few liberties are taken. Sir Henry Baskerville is introduced, and things take a radical turn after Holmes finds the missing horse. Moriarty has Moran use his air gun to kill the horse just before the finish of the race. Watson follows one of the henchmen and finds Moriarty. However, he is captured. Holmes arrives to save him just as Watson is about to be thrown down an empty elevator shaft.

The film did not do particularly well, and it was not even released in America. Wontner was 62 and perhaps without a strong script, not as able to carry the load as in previous films. The movie did have a revival, however. Basil Rathbone scored big in 1939 with his authentic *Hound of the Baskervilles*. 1940's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* also did well. Twickenham, with a Sherlock Holmes film never seen in America sitting in a can on the shelf, decided to get a little more mileage out of *Silver Blaze*. They misleadingly titled it *Murder at the Baskervilles* and released it in America. Few noticed. Of course, Kinematograph Weekly lavished praise on the actor:

"Arthur Wontner as the detective an unforgettable figure. Wontner's performance as Sherlock Holmes is easily the best histrionic contribution...he succeeds triumphantly.. Superb performance."

Wontner would revisit the role one more time in 1942, when he starred in a BBC radio production of *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, with Carleton Hobbes as Watson.

One of the Best

Twickenham, which made four of the five films, operated on a small budget. Wontner recalled:

The studio wasn't much more than a big tin shed, really; not like film studios today. We used to start filming early in the morning and continued until pretty late at night, with very few breaks. Of course, we had to stop shooting quite often when a train went by, because of the noise. But we couldn't afford much time for retakes, and there were no elaborate rehearsals or anything like that.

However, Wontner's performances stand up well over a half-century later. He followed William Gillette and Eille Norwood and preceded Basil Rathbone by two years. Along with Jeremy Brett, Arthur Wontner is one of the five great acting Sherlock Holmes'.

His solemn delivery sometimes feels plodding and languid. This is not unreasonable from a man who was in his mid-fifties when he made his first Holmes film. However, he certainly sounds like Holmes when he speaks, and no actor before or since has resembled Sidney Paget's illustrations so closely. Perhaps had there been more of an on-screen chemistry between Wontner and Ian Fleming, his performance would have

seemed more lively. There is very little sense of the underlying bond between the two men that Doyle created.

But when the camera shows Wontner sitting in his chair, smoking a pipe, we feel that we are seeing exactly the man that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle pictured. Elements of Wontner's portrayal can be seen in the Grenada production. Jeremy Brett combined Wontner's intellectual Holmes with Rathbone's energetic Sherlock.

It is unfortunate that Wontner was never given the opportunity to make a Holmes film set in the Victorian era with a good-sized budget and a solid script. It is likely he would have turned in a definitive performance. Unfortunately his legacy has not been as lasting for non-Holmes devotees. Sherlockian Michael Pointer relates being at the 1951 Sherlock Holmes Exhibition opening with Wontner. The organizer informed the audience that the actor had appeared in five Sherlock Holmes films. A reporter next to Pointer said to Wontner, "Oh, yes, and what part did you play?"

In 1933, famous Sherlockian Vincent Starrett said, "The great Sherlock Holmes picture has not as yet been made...But Mr. Arthur Wontner is still available. Will not someone send a special, fast steamer for Mr. Arthur Wontner?"

About which Wontner himself later commented, "Well, they never did, you know, they never did."