

All references to Stapledown, Staple Lane, GU5 9TE owned by Clough Williams-Ellis then sold in 1929 to Charles Laughton & Elsa Lanchester, scanned by Albury History Society - alburyhistory.org.uk

CHARLES LAUGHTON

An Intimate Biography

by Charles Higham
Introduction by Elsa Lanchester



ence of an old house, with the feeling of maturity, and perhaps the end of somebody else's family line. There was Stapledown, the house in the bluebell woods of Surrey, England; the cabin in Idyllwild, California; the cottage in the orchard at Palos Verdes, also in California; the house at Pacific Palisades near Los Angeles, with its garden of oranges, fuchsias, and camellias; the house on North Curson Avenue, in the heart of Hollywood, with its acre of greenery; and finally the Santa Monica cottage and its little tangled terraces with ferns and trees.

Wood fires and sunsets seemed to mark each home that Charles and I lived in over the period of thirty-three years that we were married. There was loyalty to the idea of marriage, there was mutual protection, and tolerance and respect—words that did not at any time pass between us. Charles always had a fear of analyzing or discussing the causes and effects of the marriage, always fearful that the structure would break if words were spoken. So nothing was said. Except very late. Charles hoped to go away with me when all passion, both in art and life, had gone: "I do wish it would all pass, and we could go peacefully to beautiful places and beautiful countries. We've never really been on a holiday, have we?"

In our early days we often took time to walk on the Yorkshire Moors, and once I remember with great clarity being in Scotland in 1938 and spending a day at Loch Katrine. We were on a personal appearance tour for a film, and had a spare day. We spent it chugging round the loch on a lovely, tubby little official reservoir steamer. The day was very beautiful, and I believe typical of the area. It was very clear: ominous gray clouds, yet the sun shining through in bright shafts, we thought on us, and in patches on the green land around the loch. A hundred tiny, tumbling rivulets fell into the loch, jumping through ferns and grasses. We were happy and enchanted. It was one of the few places Charles said he would like to go back to. As we traveled north by car and train, we wondered why so many soldiers were going south—very young boys in badly fitting uniforms. Territorials.

Our marriage endured partly as a result of the places we lived in or even visited. There should have been more trips to the country, to the mountains, deserts, and forests. Work sent us to lovely places: Hampton Court Palace and Kew Gardens; to Brighton,

Sussex, with its glittering pier and South Downs; to Hawaii and to Portmeirion, Wales, to study *King Lear*. These places form a kind of necklace of charms remembered.

As Charles became more involved with work, we missed one spring and then another. Our trips to see the California wild flowers dwindled to nothing by the 1950s. Life went on round the pool at home, and it was quiet. Our banana trees produced good bananas (and still do) and encouraged beautiful yellow orioles to nest in them round the pool. We had flourishing night-blooming cereus that put on a show one or two nights a year. On such a rare night we tried to get friends to drop in to see the show. They did. The huge perfumed flowers came out at nine in the evening and died at 2 A.M. Such an occasion caused all possible kinds of people to meet and mix well.

Creative artists themselves only see the many imperfections in their own art and the impossibility of capturing their dream in the short time allowed to them. But the art collector can build a structure in perpetuity with his knowledge and his taste. If he is faithful to these attributes, he leaves something for others. One little step in the selectiveness of another generation.

The art collection Charles acquired over the years fascinated many collectors and painters. Charles had an infallible eye for what he wanted to reach his own fulfillment. While on tour, Charles wrote to the painter Morris Graves in Seattle in 1943: "I can't get up to see you as I have to get back at once to Hollywood to start a movie. Is it possible you could send me down a few pictures to look at? I am a very prompt guy and won't keep them hanging around. I write a lousy letter. I've somehow never been able to express myself on paper, and I'm just dribbling on trying to say how tremendously stimulated I was by your painting. Very much hope to meet you someday."

Paintings had a direct effect on Charles's acting and his peace of mind, and I cannot put this in better words than Morris Graves's own. He wrote: "Charles told me there was something in my paintings that helped him as an actor. There was a unique trumpet line, something in the style, the shapes, that he was able to translate into his acting. He had the ability to sway people to what he wanted—he didn't *direct* them, but carried them along

Valley without finding exactly what they wanted. Then, about six weeks after the run of *On the Spot* began, Elsa went to dinner at the home of the architect and town-planner Clough Williams-Ellis, a vibrant, energetic man with a handsome, weathered face, and his wife Amabel in Hampstead. Elsa told them of her problem. Clough had just the place they needed: a cottage in Surrey he was about to give up because he was going to spend much of his time at his new and subsequently celebrated experimental model village, Portmeirion in Wales.

As soon as Elsa heard the description of the cottage, her heart skipped several beats. She telephoned Charles excitedly at his theatre. The cottage was called Stapledown, it was only twenty-eight miles from London, and was built 625 feet up in woods with bracken growing all the way to the front door. It was about two miles to the nearest village, and was surrounded by pine trees and bluebells.

That Sunday, Charles and Elsa took the first available train with Clough to see the cottage. They fell in love with it at once. It was thatched, built of wood, and supported by pine-tree trunks about one foot off the ground. They bought it quickly.

For the next few years, Stapledown was a constant pleasure, a binding factor in the marriage. Clough Williams-Ellis was to build the Laughtons a brick cottage on the grounds, but in 1929 there was just the wooden house lit by kerosene lamps, with a hole in the garden doing service as a toilet. Later, they had an "Elsan" outdoor septic tank, which unfortunately became known as "Elsa" when the "n" was rubbed off.

A man called Burns used to drive up from the village of Clendon to cook the vegetables for them on oil burners—which took two hours to boil potatoes—to grill steaks or fry them on iron griddles over the wood fire. They washed with tin jugs of water and tin basins; often they used cold water, because it took an hour to make it even lukewarm on the burner. But the Laughtons didn't think of it as primitive. They enjoyed the blazing fires, with an endless supply of wood for kindling, and the quiet nights, even when it was so cold they had to heap six blankets on the beds.

They enjoyed the passage of the seasons—a panorama of color in those woods. The first flowers which appeared after the frost melted were the wild anemones; then banks of primroses broke

through; a sea of bluebells; wild crab-apple; wild daffodils; bracken growing so high they could walk under it; buttercups and cuckoo flowers; butterfly orchids and bee orchids; poppies and miles of foxgloves. They made sloe gin with sloes picked from the hedges and barley sugar each fall. Later, they made a circular garden around the brick house, where they planted vegetables and flowers. Charles became ecstatic when he saw the Michaelmas daisies at Christmas time. The daisies attracted butterflies, and one year he and Elsa saw an unforgettable sight: thousands of butterflies with saffron and russet wings covering the pale blue of the flowers like a tide.

Driving in the country with Charles could be a hazard. Unable to drive, he would thrust his arms across Elsa in the driver's seat in order to point out some tree or flower, often blocking her view and almost causing an accident. If she didn't stop the car so they could pick the flower he had admired, he gave her serious trouble. The sight of a double rainbow against black clouds on the South Downs of Sussex threw him into transports of joy.

In London, during their days together at the time, they found a continuing mutual love of painting. They went to the Tate and the National Gallery a great deal; in later years, they were frequent visitors at the Lefevre Galleries, where John Armstrong exhibited.

After *On the Spot* ended its tour, Edgar Wallace wrote from 31 Portland Place asking Charles if he would take on a new thriller, *The Mouthpiece*, about a crooked lawyer. Charles was disappointed with the play, feeling it had none of the dash of the earlier work, and he declined it. He also turned down a subsequent Wallace concoction, a play about a Chinese swordsman, despite the most earnest pleas by its author.

During the hiatus that followed his rejection of this last part, Charles appeared unhappily in three best-forgotten films of the period⁵ and acted a bit role as a greedy old diner in a nightclub scene of E. A. Dupont's famous picture, *Piccadilly*. More auspiciously, he took on one of the best stage roles of his career: William Marble, the unhappy murderer of Jeffrey Dell's version of C. S. Forester's novel, *Payment Deferred*. He and Elsa became

⁵ *Down River*, *Wolves*, and *Comets*, a "talkie revue."

erell—and she liked to feel herself part of the group. Elsa acquired Virginia Woolf's cook, Nellie Boxall. Nellie was a Boulestin-trained Cockney, and a treasure.

Charles and Elsa spent happy times at Stapledown as well, walking through the woods and picking flowers. Over the years, Elsa—and Charles when he was in England—made many improvements to Gordon Square. John Armstrong painted Wells Coates's handsome sliding doors between the dining room and the sitting room, and wooden bookshelves with underlit glass tops running through two rooms, while Coates simplified everything, creating a big window at the back which gave a view of plane trees and gardens. Charles and Elsa brought many branches and twigs from Stapledown to Gordon Square, and placed them in pots along the lighted shelves.

Back in Hollywood, Charles was busy making *Payment Deferred* at MGM. Irving Thalberg, the delicate young production genius who ran the studio with Louis B. Mayer, had seen Charles in the stage production, and admired him deeply, but several members of the MGM board felt that he was not a box-office draw and insisted the picture be made on a budget unusually low for that studio. Lothar Mendes, a run-of-the-mill Hungarian director, was engaged for the job; and the script followed the play with few changes. Charles, disappointed that Elsa had not been given the role of his daughter, was listless during the film. His only real interest lay in helping the young actor Ray Milland, who played the murdered nephew, to walk through a door without bumping into it, and to read his lines with a modicum of conviction.

This film version is so feeble, so clumsily managed, that today it holds little or no interest. Charles's performance seems external and unfelt, so that even in the crucial scene when he learns of his wife's death no look of agony crosses his face. His laughter when he realizes he is going to hang unjustly for her death rather than justly for that of his nephew is quite effective, his face shining like a moon, the rest of the room plunged in sudden darkness; and he just rises to the challenge of the final sequence in the cell with his daughter. But clearly the inadequacy of the director and the ineptitude of the cast infected him, and the results were inferior to his best work.

Disappointed with Mendes' approach to the picture, Charles

was really dismayed by Erle C. Kenton, who directed *Island of Lost Souls*, from the novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H. G. Wells. Kenton insisted on acting out scenes dressed up in the evil doctor's white tropical suit and hat, and even offered to teach Charles how to handle a whip—forgetting Charles's knowledge of this—in the scenes in which Dr. Moreau lashes his half-human, half-animal army of slaves on a sinister tropical island. Charles was disgusted by the story. His love of animals welled up; he felt a deep-seated repulsion at what he felt to be a crude exploitation of the theme of vivisection. The journey to Catalina Island—which was partly converted to Wells's island—by steamer was a disagreeable ordeal. The animals used in the picture were in cages, and for a sequence the actors dressed in monkey skins were made to run past them, prodding them. A tiger lashed out and tore one man's arm almost from its socket. The seas were rough; the animals whimpered and vomited, and their fetid odor sickened Charles. During the last part of the journey, the ship became blanketed in heavy fog, a fact which delighted the director and his cameraman, Karl Struss, who were filming the journey, but did nothing to alleviate Charles's feelings of distress.

The completed movie is of great interest. The setting, of a sinister jungle island crawling with creepers and threatening outsize plants, is realized with great imagination by the art department, and photographed in glittering, morbidly fascinating images by Karl Struss. Although the handling of the drama, the arrival of the strangers at the island, the appearance of the half-simian creatures, Moreau's final confrontation with them and vivisection by them, are not as fully realized as one would wish, the *mise en scène* and the overall atmosphere of suffocating terror are ideally brought off by the director. Charles's acting, despite his dislike of the part, is surprisingly committed. He makes a convincing figure of Moreau, in his white ducks, swaggering or fawning, lasciviously contemplating a new torture or smarmily dwelling on the heroine's charms. The repulsiveness is relieved by a cunning humor, the confidence by a creeping sense of fear that he may have taken on more than he can handle in this remote tropical outpost. Moreau in Charles's hands is much deeper than H. G. Wells could suggest: a perversion of a British Colonial administrator, and at the same time a symbol of Colonial repressiveness.

Charles was handed the role of Horace Prin, a Cockney despot of a Malayan river basin, who marries a nightclub singer and suspects her of having an affair with an army deserter, one of his private militia of crooks and dropouts. Faced with a part which was little more than a limp reworking of Sturm in *The Devil and the Deep*, Charles ingeniously enriched the character with many strong personal touches. He insisted on organizing his own wardrobe for Prin: a slack, badly pressed public school blazer, the kind of garment an envious and socially ambitious Cockney would be inclined to wear; an equally pretentious white waistcoat, and baggy tropical ducks; finally—a really witty, ingenious touch—an Oxford boater perched on his head. The entire role was steeped in class hatred. The writers made it clear that Prin despised a world which had looked down on him, that he was obtaining his revenge, and didn't care what the consequences might be. He calls his American bride "Your ladyship" with biting contempt; he sneers at "these bloomin' snobs" referring to the seedy collection of colonials at Baja; he praises his shabby, bamboo-furnished river yacht as a "stinkin' palace"; and he openly despises his overseer as coming from an even more contemptible social environment than he ("Yer an American, are yer—well, I ain't finicky"). Charles's last sequence is so extraordinary one can't help feeling he must have had a hand in it. With hero and heroine in flight, and the natives closing in to murder him, he settles down to a final game of poker with his overseer. The overseer is murdered. Charles looks at his dead face and says: "First time in me life, 'ere I am with a royal flush and yer goes and croaks on me. Blast yer, what are yer grinning at?"

And now, as in certain scenes in *The Devil and the Deep*, Charles goes beyond acting into a personal expression of his anguish. Referring to the escaped lovers, his eyes brim with what seem to be genuine tears as he says: "What did you think they had that I didn't have, eh?" (He corrects himself.) "No! No! Soft! That's what you was! All of you! Mush! Mush! Can you 'ear me now from where you are, Ballister? I'm King of the River, I am, and I always will be!" The painful feeling that he is unattractive, that he does not belong to the romantic world of the good-looking, and the bolstering pride in his attainment of carving out a place in the jungle—Charles was born to convey these emotions,

and the last scene of this otherwise ordinary melodrama was one of his greatest moments on the screen.

Charles did not like the director, Stuart Walker, and often clashed with him on details of his direction of the players. He also disliked Charles Bickford, a hefty, rather crude red-headed character actor. He was not warmly admiring of Carole Lombard, notably awkward as his wife, but he was sympathetic toward a comparative newcomer, Kent Taylor (playing the hero, Van Elst), whom he taught to speak in a subdued voice for the microphones. As always, Charles refused to see the rushes, dreading the thought of looking at himself on the screen. He would call Lombard and Kent Taylor into his dressing room at the lunch break, discussing interpretation of scenes between the three of them without the director's knowledge. Frequently they would rehearse lines and gestures in full. When they reached the set their performances were radically different from those Walker required of them. Charles was as meticulous as always in details of dress, shoes, the use of tiny gestures; as always he used to work himself up to scenes in agonized silent contemplation; and he liked having Ravel's *Bolero* played between sequences to give him the feeling he was living in a jungle filled with recurrent drums. (In one scene, Lombard says, "Those drums out there—Ravel must have heard them.")

After *White Woman*, Charles returned yet again to England, to a more congenial assignment. He was to appear in a season of the Old Vic Company, including productions of *The Cherry Orchard*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, *Love for Love*, and *Macbeth*. Elsa joined Charles on the ship at Plymouth and they continued to Paris for the opening of *Henry VIII*. Back in England she managed to find two rooms and a sitting room in Jermyn Street. Gordon Square was still not ready, and Charles was only earning sixty pounds a week, with Elsa at a salary of ten pounds. At weekends they would go to Stapleford, after watching the work on Gordon Square.

The entire Old Vic season was under the supervision of the great Lilian Baylis, with the young and very talented Tyrone Guthrie directing the plays. Guthrie was, Charles and Elsa agreed, like the Butterfly that Stamped, affected and brittle, with suggestions on interpretation that Charles did not find helpful. The

to move from comedy to horrifying menace, from epicene subservience to masculine assertiveness. Like Ruggles, Javert is a man raised strictly within the confines of a system, and it took a genius like Charles to realize the similarities in these very different men. Javert is a servant just as much as Ruggles: a servant of the law. ("Good, bad, or indifferent, the law is no business of mine. *But the law to the letter!*") Javert is like a machine, sexless, bloodless, bent only on carrying out a code; when he fails in the line of duty, he begs for justice. Charles's most extraordinary acting in the picture is his demand for dismissal when he feels he has incorrectly identified Valjean as the Mayor; as so often before Charles's performance goes beyond acting to an expression of an acceptance of punishment. The look of guilt on his face is especially painful to see.

Surprisingly, Victor Hugo's story, adapted by the British writer W. P. Lipscomb, still works: its simple confrontation of pure evil with pure good, its somewhat pious atmosphere, and its mechanized suspense are perfectly realized by Boleslawski, who wisely did not attempt to modernize or smooth out the story. Toland's photography and Richard Day's recreation of Montreuil in the period 1800-1830 are masterly, and Fredric March's stiff, awkward, but deeply felt playing of Valjean has stood the test of time. It is Charles, though, who dominates the film. Though often dropping into an incongruous Yorkshire accent ("Ah moost do mah duty!"), and at times overacting, he nevertheless exerts a hypnotic power, particularly in the scene when he first suspects the Mayor of being a former galley slave. Walking down a row of sycophantic gendarmes, he snaps out a series of instructions: "Where does he come from? How long has he been here? *Who was he?*" the voice steadily gaining emphasis with each question until the last "*Who was he?*" has all the sting of Dr. Moreau's Australian stockwhip, lashing us awake after the slow-moving religious sequence that preceded it.

In February 1935, with *Les Misérables* completed, Charles and Elsa sailed to Britain to discuss new roles with Korda and to spend a couple of weeks at Gordon Square and Stapledown. They were eager to get home. In New York, Charles gave a brief interview to the *New York Times*, in which he said, "Hollywood is a goofy place. But I like it. It's the perfect mummies' home. If one

weren't a little mad one wouldn't be there." Asked what kind of role he preferred—one of those impossible questions journalists always ask—Charles looked nonplussed and irritated; Elsa rushed into the breach with, "He likes comic parts best, and I like him in them!" "Oh yes," Charles said. "Of course—*Ruggles!*"

Elsa whispered: "I screamed so much in *The Bride* my voice is almost out of commission . . . I had a nice time with codeine on our trip by train here to New York. After our last experience, Charles and I never fly."

In England in April, Charles was involved in intense discussions with Korda on two projects: *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which Leonard Woolf was translating, and *Sir Tristram Goes West*, a story intended to cash in on the success of *Ruggles of Red Gap*, about a ghost which travels with a castle when the castle is rebuilt in the West by an eccentric, *nouveau riche* American millionaire.²

Lee Garmes, the distinguished American cameraman and co-director of *Crime Without Passion*, sailed to England just after the Laughtons to discuss working on *Cyrano*, and spent many weeks at Gordon Square or at Korda's suite in the Dorchester, going over the production details with Charles, Vincent Korda, and John Armstrong, discussing the script, and helping Charles work out his makeup. But Korda finally began to panic that the American audience would find the verse too hard to follow; and his backers doubted the appeal of a grotesque like *Cyrano* to the female public. Possibly they were right. When the film was finally done by Stanley Kramer in the early 1950s, with José Ferrer as *Cyrano*, it was not a success.

With both *Cyrano* and *Sir Tristram* now doubtful prospects, Charles accepted a major role from Thalberg: Captain Bligh in a version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Frank Lloyd, the veteran director, had bought Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall's best-selling book, and originally a condition of Thalberg's purchase was that Lloyd would direct and even star in it³ as Bligh, the entire picture to be shot on a replica of the *Bounty* on a new voyage to Tahiti. Thalberg managed to talk Lloyd out of these last two demands, insisting on Laughton. Lloyd finally agreed, provided

² Eventually made as *The Ghost Goes West*, with Robert Donat, and Elsa in a small part.

³ A vainglorious idea if ever there was one. Although he had acted in obscure stage roles, he had never appeared as an actor in a film.

with Bligh fiercely condemning Christian from the boat, was actually shot at sea. Despite Charles feeling a little queasy between shots and grazing one knee while descending the Jacob's ladder, he rose magnificently to the challenge of his great speech. The rest of the journey was shot in tanks at MGM.

Jammed into a boat only fifteen feet long, Charles and his fellow crewmen were constantly drenched in water, tossed around by wires which rocked the boat, and made to roast under arc lights of several hundred watts until the makeup ran down their faces. Each day Charles's makeup grew heavier, suggesting the blisters of constant exposure; his lips were made to seem swollen by the application of special waxes which made it almost impossible for him to talk. Then, after over a week of grueling shooting, Lloyd discovered that the young actor Eddie Quillan, playing a shanghaied sailor, should not have been on the longboat at all, since his character was not among those loyal to Bligh, and in fact was hanged for his mutinous behavior. As a result of this oversight, the entire sequence had to be reshot from beginning to end, and the ordeal repeated. Despite this agonizing experience, or perhaps because of it, Charles achieved a thrilling moment at the end of the voyage, in which he cried out, on seeing the coast of Timor, "*We have beaten the sea itself!*" Several cast and crew members actually wept at the force and beauty of Charles's delivery, and he broke down himself as he finished the final words.

Sometimes, Charles felt he was very bad in a scene and deliberately ruined a take so that Lloyd would be forced to reshoot it. In a studio matching shot on the replica indoor *Bounty*, he had to pace over the entire deck inspecting the crew. He made this enormous perambulation, finally stopping short to deliver a speech. Lloyd was delighted, and was about to yell, "Cut!" when Charles looked at Lloyd and said, "I wasn't in any of my marks!" The crew roared with laughter.

The toughest phase of the shooting had been saved by Lloyd for the last week: the journey of Bligh and his loyalists to England on the *Pandora*. A complete replica of the *Pandora* was built at MGM and swung on huge metal cantilevers which made the *Bounty* prisoners below decks suffer horribly in authentic period chains. Charles again was doused with scores of gallons of water from special dump tanks, far more violent than those he had expe-

rienced during the longboat voyage, and lashed with violent gusts from the wind machines. When the *Pandora* struck a studio reef, the wind and rain were so violent that Charles had to be strapped to the wheel of the ship. Quite a few of the shots involved actual danger, and some cast members fell and broke bones on the slippery decks.

In matching shots of an actual storm up the California coast, a camera boat was upset, and a young cameraman swept away and drowned. The local press picked up the episode and exaggerated it, the headlines reading BOUNTY SUNK. LAUGHTON AND GABLE LOST. The *Evening Standard* called Elsa at Gordon Square with the bad news. Used to newspaper rumors, Elsa reacted in silence, not yet prepared to believe that it was true. Within a few hours the *Standard* called her back to tell her what had really happened, and that Charles was completely safe.

At the end of the picture, Charles had to return to Catalina for some final pickup shots. He assembled everyone on the last day of shooting in the dining hall of the local hotel and recited the Gettysburg Address with all the fire and lyricism he had shown in *Ruggles of Red Gap*.

In New York in the late summer of 1935, Charles called Elsa to tell her that he wanted to make an exciting purchase: Renoir's *The Judgment of Paris*, for \$36,000, which virtually absorbed all of his savings. She told him to go ahead. He bought the painting from the New York collector and dealer George Keller. At first he had asked Keller for a small Renoir. But Keller shrewdly produced a very large Renoir, *The Judgment*, knowing Charles would fall in love with it. Charles went back again and again, sometimes lying on the floor for an hour at a time, gazing up at it. He had been hooked.

His passion had started earlier. He already owned a Douanier Rousseau of a hand holding flowers, symbolic of his own love of botany; he owned two Matthew Smiths, and he had installed fine woodcuts in the hotel at Scarborough. Sailing back to London with the Renoir, Charles was, for once, a very happy man.

While Charles was shooting *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Elsa was busy making 8-mm. films with John and Benita Armstrong at Stapledon. The titles were *Mother India*, *Parlez-Moi d'Amour*, *The Sleeping Clergyman*, *Whither Tarzan*, and *The Good Earth*.

Charles came back and roared with laughter over the antic 8-mm. home movies, running the phonograph for background music.

For ten months, during most of 1935, and part of 1936, Charles was working futilely on the script for *Cyrano*. The Laughtons filled their time at Stapledown, picking flowers and walking in the woods, talking by the fire in the evening, cooking field mushrooms, filling pots and bowls with branches. Friends came down for weekends, and twice the Laughtons gave parties in London. One of the parties involved buying bizarre theatrical wigs for the male guests—they bought the straw-colored thatch-topped wigs worn traditionally by village idiots, Shirley Temple moppet wigs, pigtails, and masses of curls. Alexander Korda looked particularly weird in a long flaxen blond wig with pigtails and pink satin bows, while the film executive Sidney Bernstein sported a black Chinese doughnut of hair, like Widow Twankey in the pantomime *Aladdin*.

The Laughtons gave another party for Fredric March and his wife Florence Eldridge, Helen Hayes, and Ruth Gordon. Ruth Gordon had been a specially close friend for several years. Jed Harris and Ruth shared a house and the Laughtons had after-theatre suppers with them night after night during the New York run of *Payment Deferred*. The Laughtons met Ruth later at the Garden of Allah where their cook Jane had served boiled chicken and bread sauce; Charles had wanted Ruth to play the role taken by Zasu Pitts in *Ruggles of Red Gap*, and he had encouraged her to play *The Country Wife*.

When Ruth opened in *The Country Wife*, a great success at the Old Vic under the direction of Tyrone Guthrie, Charles and Elsa stood at the back of the circle so that she wouldn't see them. Later, they drove her to Stapledown, which she always remembered for its outdoor toilet, and for the harsh cold of its rooms under the thatched roof.

In 1935 Korda became obsessed with the idea of making a series of films about famous artists. Determined as always to reconquer the American market in the wake of the triumph of *Henry VIII*, he was further stimulated by the success of Warner Brothers' new cycle of biographical movies, beginning with *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, and was convinced he could beat Warners at their own

game. After thinking seriously about casting Charles as Beethoven, he finally decided to prepare the story of Rembrandt for him instead.

Charles was immediately enthused. Irritated by the long and futile months of work on *Cyrano*, and convinced finally that Leonard Woolf's translation would not work for an audience, he was delighted to find a firm offer of work in a part he could believe in.

The part of Rembrandt was a marvelous opportunity for an actor. Korda told Charles he intended to emphasize Rembrandt's hatred of the pompous and stupid aristocracy and bourgeoisie of seventeenth-century Holland which had failed to appreciate Rembrandt's genius, stripped him of his possessions, and reduced him to begging in the streets. With his contempt for class distinctions, Charles was fascinated by Korda's interpretation. In profound discussions with Korda, and based on his own readings of Rembrandt's life, Charles pointed out that Rembrandt felt his artistic gift as a burden, seeing life as a cage, that he was tortured with doubts, and that at times he hated himself as much as he hated the dull and stodgy Dutch public. It must have become increasingly clear to Korda that Charles saw himself in the role, and that this reflection of his own convictions, joys, and despair would help him to play it with compelling force.

Korda daringly cast Gertrude Lawrence, with her large features and threatening, exaggerated voice, as Rembrandt's monstrous housekeeper-mistress. Charles was determined that Elsa should play Hendrikje Stoffels, the sweet-natured and determined maid who, following the birth of her child, marries Rembrandt but dies only a few weeks later. Korda was strongly opposed to the idea, but he was unable to come up with a better suggestion, and finally allowed himself to be overruled.

Charles became obsessed with the painter's character, and he, alone at tulip time, and later with Elsa, traveled to Holland to study all the backgrounds of Rembrandt's life. They looked at paintings for hours in Amsterdam as well as in London, studied the self-portraits most fully, read all of the biographies in print. Elsa gazed at pictures of the aristocratic peasant Hendrikje, Charles grew a moustache to exactly the right length and learned to hold a brush correctly. He had himself made only feeble efforts

eral months only, and she loved him, as he loved her, constantly and deeply. Their weekends at Stapledown, reading, walking in the woods, picking flowers, of which they knew every Latin name, collecting branches, were marvelous escapes from the pressures of work and of London. They loved to collect good pottery and antiques; they laughed at the same jokes; they liked the same food, good, solid English fare, steak and kidney pudding, Irish stew, boiled meat or fish. They enjoyed satirizing pompous humbugs together; they shared an irreverence for "society" and for the haughtier members of the "cultural" world. Yet they were both deeply cultured, enormously well read. And at Gordon Square they had the pleasure of sharing the environment, elegant and simple and aesthetically flawless, that Wells Coates had designed under Charles's dominating guidance. And the presence of the Bloomsbury group nearby, with all that meant in dazzling conversation, shared interests in painting and music and literature. Above all, *The Judgment of Paris* glowed above the fireplace as a symbol of the permanent beauty that could be earned from the salt mines of picture-making. They began to build up a small collection of paintings in those prewar years.

It is clear that by 1937 Charles was feeling very strongly, in the wake of the fiasco of *I, Claudius*, that he needed to make his own pictures, that he must be able to play parts which he could control at the writing stage, and that he must have a real hand in the direction. He therefore decided to form a partnership with his friend Erich Pommer, who would act as co-producer, and with John Maxwell, head of Associated British Pictures. He would hire writers to prepare scripts, and he would call the new company Mayflower Productions, a symbol of the British need to invade the American market. Pommer, who had come to Britain penniless after Hitler deposed him as head of the giant Berlin studios of UFA, seized the chance of directing a company with great enthusiasm. He turned out to be an irritable, irascible, but gifted partner in the enterprise.

All through the spring of 1937, the political crisis in Europe deepening hourly, Charles and Pommer began to develop scripts which would form the basis of their first three films. Bartlett Cormack, an experienced American scenarist who had worked with

DeMille and written the famous Broadway play *The Racket*, prepared a version of Somerset Maugham's celebrated novel of the South Seas, *The Vessel of Wrath*. The novelist-playwright Clemence Dane wrote a script entitled *St. Martin's Lane*, a story of the London buskers who entertained the London theatre queues, and she adapted Daphne du Maurier's novel *Jamaica Inn*. The partners decided to make *The Vessel of Wrath* first. It provided ideal parts for Elsa and Charles. She would play a bluenose missionary, given to attacking the unrighteous with her umbrella in a Dutch island colony; Charles would be a penniless ne'er-do-well, who gradually becomes drawn to her, and she to him. After many discussions, everyone decided it would be too difficult and expensive to make the picture in the South Seas. Instead, they would shoot it in the South of France.

Throughout May the discussions grew fiercer and more concentrated. Charles relished the idea of being his own producer, no longer having to submit to the whims of various movie moguls with whom he had little or nothing in common. He and Elsa carefully selected the clothes which Ginger Ted and Martha Jones would wear: he a shapeless tropical suit, filthy and drenched in sweat, she brandishing an umbrella, her clothes ill-fitting and prim, hiding her body from the eyes of men. His hair would be tousled, hers drawn back in a tight, officious little bun.

Charles, Elsa, Erich Pommer, and Bartlett Cormack, who was also to direct, chose the supporting cast. Tyrone Guthrie was ideal as the fluttery, hypersensitive, and faintly ridiculous missionary brother of Martha, a character the Laughtons added to Maugham's story; Robert Newton was acceptable as a saturnine local district officer; and various natives recruited from London casting offices were added to the cast. The entire company and the crew left for Ste. Maxime in the late summer of 1937. While Charles, Pommer, and Cormack were looking for suitable locations, Elsa swam and shopped with Benita Armstrong, who came down from England to keep her company. Meanwhile, she read and reread the script, at once drawn to the part of Martha Jones, delighted that at last she had a real opportunity to appear as a major motivating force in a film vehicle, and terrified by the size of the challenge.

Shooting began in August 1937, at the handsome subtropical

needed money, both Charles and Elsa, acting very humanely, agreed that he should be loaned various amounts; and he remained friendly with them for many years; he was among the pallbearers at Charles's funeral. David constantly tried to help Charles by making him feel he was physically attractive, that he should take care of his physical appearance more thoroughly. Charles, in turn, knowing that David had lost both his mother and brother, acted very paternally toward him.

Charles's relationship with David Roberts, at first sexually and then platonically, lasted for more than two decades. It would have wrecked most marriages, even one as extraordinary and binding as that of Charles and Elsa. It was far more serious than Charles's relationships with his two masseurs Dennis and Bob, although it did not involve Charles in the overpowering emotion of falling in love. It says much for the strength of the Laughtons' friendship and marital affection that these survived the crisis; that the freedom each allowed the other was so complete they could accept each other's lives, and take pleasure in the happiness that either partner could find. From shortly after their marriage they had accepted the fact that fidelity was not to be a condition of it.

In their opinions, humors, and responses, Charles and Elsa remained as closely knit as ever. The house was the linchpin of their lives. They were constantly rediscovering, just as they had at Gordon Square and at Stapledown, the shared pleasure of adding beautiful objects to various parts of the house, and the quiet delight of working on their lovely garden. Their similar enthusiasms in painting, food, and wine remained constant. At night, they were separated by Elsa's appearances at the Turnabout. But during the day, when neither was appearing in a film, they could discuss what happened at the theatre, or Charles's experiences visiting friends. It was not until much later that they began to drift apart, their dinners together silent and strained. In the 1940s, their life was solid and secure. For the first time in their lives, they were not constantly traveling, or subject to frequent long separations.

Shortly after the Laughtons moved into the house at Pacific Palisades, Charles signed a contract with Universal to appear in *It Started with Eve*, a Deanna Durbin vehicle in which he would

be an ancient millionaire who plays Cupid for a young couple from his deathbed. He had admired Deanna Durbin in her earlier films, finding her presence on the screen wonderfully fresh, unspoiled, and filled with the spirit of youth, and when he received the script he accepted at once.

The moment Charles was cast, the studio became alive with rumors that there would be trouble on the set; everyone began to believe that Laughton and Durbin would hate each other. Henry Koster, the cozy Austrian who had been asked to direct, was nervous about the project; he didn't speak English fluently, and he was afraid that the great British actor would be impatient with him. But from the moment they met they had an intense rapport. Koster, good-natured, witty, and relaxed, appealed very strongly to Charles, who respected Koster because of his gentle and considerate method of directing. Koster, in turn, was astonished to find Charles was not villainous or cantankerous, but instead was honest, plain-speaking, and kind.

Deanna Durbin didn't meet Charles until the picture had started. She wrote to Elsa in 1968: "We were introduced to each other on the set when I shook hands with a little old man, grey, wrinkled and stooped, with a shaky voice and a funny little walk. We worked hard that day and had no time for personal contacts. So after work I invited 'Mr. Laughton' for a drink. We walked back from the set and when we got to my bungalow he pulled off his rubber nose and rubber face and there he was . . . 40 years younger, straightened out and able to laugh . . . and that's what we both did and kept on doing through that picture and every time we got together . . . somehow things clicked between us and thanks to Charles I found out that making pictures could be fun, lost all my tenseness and discovered that Hollywood and making pictures were not the most important things in the world." Charles loaned Deanna books and paintings, talked to her about the theatre, and encouraged her to appreciate creative forms of art. He and Elsa visited Deanna in her Italianate mansion in Hollywood, and after their marriage she and her husband Vaughn Paul came over to Pacific Palisades. Making the movie was an easy, happy, exhilarating experience for Charles; and sometimes Charles and Deanna enjoyed themselves so much they upset the balance of serious scenes. In a sequence in which the old man lay