

The Runaway Bride

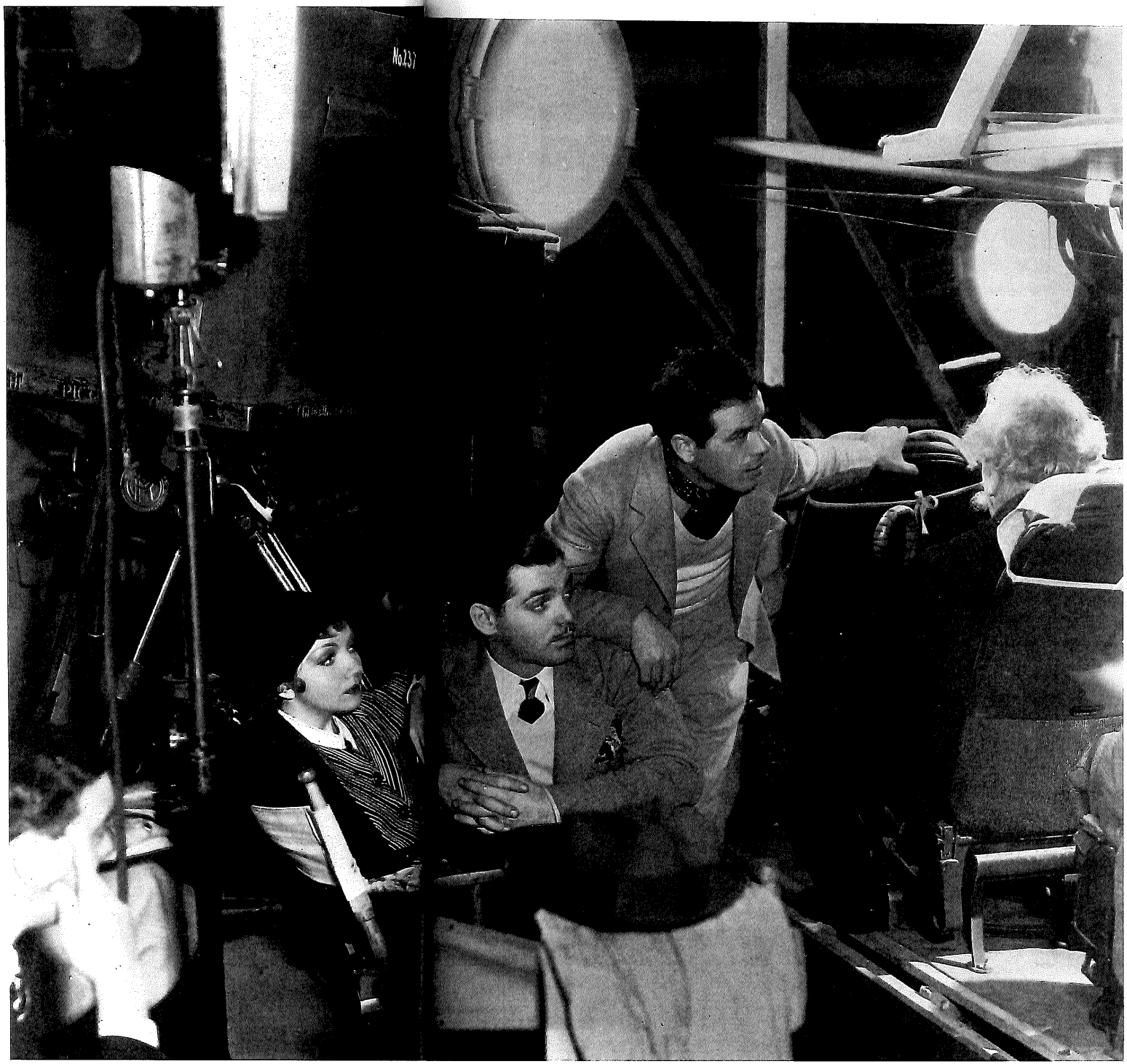
HOLLYWOOD ROMANTIC COMEDY OF THE 1930's

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CAPRA AND COLBERT: IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT



Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable, and Frank Capra on the set of *It Happened*

THE EARLY-THIRTIES gangster movies of MGM and Warner Bros.—*Little Caesar* (1930), *The Secret Six* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931)—represent Hollywood's most vigorous response to the Depression. One can almost feel, in the suppressed energy of a Wallace Beery, a James Cagney, or an Edward G. Robinson, the movies' helpless admiration of the banditry that had caused the Crash, which shifts, as the gangster goes down at the end, into a collective urge for self-immolation. But the weepers of those years addressed the Depression, too, though less defiantly: they were about the more insidious emotions that came with disaster—fear and remorse. The basic weeper heroine, beautiful, smart, and no longer young, had once given into a reckless impulse and was now paying for her mistake with a maimed life, a life without dignity or security. Pitying her and condescending to her, the audience could atone for its sins of fast living in the twenties: the weeper heroine was, in short, a Depression scapegoat.

And in 1931 she was everywhere in the movies. There was the upper-class edition at MGM, RKO, and Universal—the woman entrapped in the genteel poverty of her apartment, raising the illicit child of the married man she loved. There was the lower-class version at Warner Bros. and Columbia—the city girl who was framed and sent to prison, where she scrubbed floors and exchanged bitter wisecracks with fellow prisoners. At Fox, the rural waif-woman emerged, compromised by a man and misunderstood by narrow-minded townsfolk—a descendant of Lillian Gish in Griffith's 1921 *Way Down East.* The sheer volume of these 1931 love-and-sin titles was awesome: *Transgression* (Kay Francis), *There's No Limit* (Clara Bow), *The Common Law* (Constance Bennett), *Woman of Experience* (Helen Twelvetrees), *The Woman Between* (Lily Damita), *Devotion* (Ann Harding), *Consolation Marriage* (Irene Dunne), *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (Greta Garbo), *The Easiest Way* (Bennett), *A Free Soul* (Norma Shearer), *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* (Helen Hayes), *Possessed* (Joan Crawford), *Once a Lady* (Ruth Chatterton), *City Streets* (Sylvia Sidney), *Dishonored* (Marlene Dietrich), *The Night Angel* (Nancy Carroll), *His Woman* (Claudette Colbert), *Illicit* (Barbara Stanwyck), *Bought* (Bennett), *Safe in Hell* (Dorothy Mackaill), *Daughter of the Dragon* (Anna May Wong)—and there were many more. "Sinful girls lead in 1931," said *Variety* at the end of that year. "The Great God Public fully endorsed the heroines of easy virtue. . . . More babes

were wrenched from mothers' arms; more tears shed over unofficial motherhood, than in any previous film year . . ."

But by the beginning of 1932, this outpouring of anger and remorse in the gangsters and weepers had subsided. The box office could never sustain unregulated emotion—or Hollywood didn't think it could—so the "pure" genres of 1931 gave way to the hybrids of 1932. The gangsters started turning into newsmen and criminal lawyers; the weeper ladies remained prideful and flawed but descended to the level of second leads in more panoramic genres, such as the urban "all-star" melodrama (MGM's *Grand Hotel;* RKO's *Symphony of Six Million*), the colonial romance (MGM's *Red Dust*), the shipboard affair (Paramount's *One-Way Passage*), or the baronial family melodrama (RKO's *A Bill of Divorcement*). In its heyday, however, the weeper, like every genre in Hollywood history, had attracted several directors who found it congenial to their temperaments and who stayed to become long-term masters of it. John Stahl developed a deceptively simple pseudodocumentary style with melodrama. His 1932 *Back Street,* based on the popular Fanny Hurst novel, in which middle-class Irene Dunne carries on a lifelong affair with upper-class, married John Boles, stands today as the classic Depression weeper. Those final close-ups of the stoic and graying Irene Dunne, as she boards the ocean liner to accompany Boles's family "anonymously" to Europe, seem to sum up Stahl's vision of the weeper heroine: so much handsomeness exchanged for so much hollowness.

Meanwhile, Josef von Sternberg at Paramount had inaugurated a weeper style of his own, using the actress he had "discovered" in Germany in 1930, Marlene Dietrich. The movies usually began after the Dietrich figure had passed beyond the pale of respectability and was wandering about the world in a "fallen" state. Sternberg created a texture of languid voluptuousness to complement her: the movies were full of shadows, wooden slats, palm fronds, military uniforms, *moderne* demimondaine fashions, and a hothouse conception of a kind of stultifying romance that visits only jaded personalities. The peak of the Sternberg-Dietrich oeuvre was the 1932 *Shanghai Express,* which placed the blond Dietrich, dripping with black feathers, in the landscape of fascist Shanghai.

FRANK CAPRA, too, in the early thirties became a weeper specialist, of sorts. After *Ladies of Leisure* he made three other pictures with Barbara Stanwyck that contain partial weeper plots and an intermittent weeper air of tragic desperation: *The Miracle Woman* (1931), *Forbidden* (1932), and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). All of these movies feature independent women who suffer for their ambition. In *The Miracle Woman* Stanwyck

plays a lady preacher modeled on Aimee Semple McPherson; in *Forbidden* she's a newspaper woman cynically involved in the affairs of the big city; in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* she's the fiancée of a missionary to China, who intends to share his work with him. Two of these movies, moreover, were modeled explicitly on big-studio weepers: *Forbidden* recalls *Back Street; The Bitter Tea of General Yen* refers to *Shanghai Express.*

But the Capra-Stanwycks display a different emphasis from the mainstream weepers. First and foremost, they avoid the smug aura of condemnation that hovered around the images of the other weeper heroines. Stanwyck pictured alone is always pictured vital, not resigned and stoic like the Dunne of *Back Street* or the Dietrich of *Shanghai Express.* Her beauty is located in her intensity, not in her pathos. In other words, these movies don't fetishize female loneliness; they come close to admiring it. All three start off with strong scenes, unimaginable in conventional weepers, in which the Stanwyck character declares her autonomy: in *The Miracle Woman* she mounts the pulpit and excoriates her dead father's congregation for neglecting him; in *Forbidden* she abandons the small-town library where she works, withdraws her savings, and books herself on a cruise to Havana; in *General Yen* she travels alone to war-torn China to meet her fiancé and, on the night of her arrival, urges him to let her help save some orphans. At bottom, the Stanwyck character is not a weeper heroine, lacking the fortitude to be virtuous: she's a figure on the opposite end of the spectrum, strong-willed and ready to acquire virtue from experience.

And that experience concerns a kind of disaster that was related to the disaster in the country at large. Conventional weepers almost never alluded directly to the Depression—their settings give off an upper-and-middle-class flavor. But Capra in these four movies links the self-awareness of the Stanwyck figures specifically to poverty. We saw how Stanwyck in *Ladies of Leisure* embodied the defiant spirit of the little people. In *The Miracle Woman* Stanwyck's lady preacher owes her rise to the miseries of poor rural Americans. In *Forbidden* the secretary she plays is poor herself, and raising a child out of wedlock. And in *General Yen* her New England girl, Megan Davis, awakens to human suffering when she finds herself alone in the streets of Shanghai, surrounded by the Chinese masses. *The Miracle Woman* is especially important for its visualization of suffering. The images that we associate today with the Depression—the worn, homely faces of rural people—had begun to appear in newsreels some time around 1931. But *The Miracle Woman* was one of the first feature films to photograph these faces, along with the surroundings that match them—the bare wooden tabernacle-church where Stanwyck preaches, the rutted dirt road leading to it.

Besides capturing the surface look of war and poverty, Capra also explored the psychological ramifications of such disasters in the lives of his protagonists. The love affairs in these movies, unlike the passive, hopeless kind of love in the weepers, incorporate a struggle for power between the lovers, arising from the social upheaval surrounding them. Sometimes Capra makes the Stanwyck figure more powerful than her leading man, as in *The Miracle Woman,* where she's the popular lady preacher and her lover is a blind ex-aviator from her congregation. Sometimes he puts her back in a subservient position, as in *Forbidden,* where she's a newswoman and her lover is a prestigious married politician. In *General Yen* he has her New England girl fall in love with a Chinese warlord who is her equal, emotionally and intellectually, but who is bound to be her antagonist as well, since he comes from another race.

In all these movies, the power struggle between the lovers gradually transforms itself into an acknowledgment by both of them of mutual need and respect. The challenge Capra set himself was to show these private rituals of romance evolving within the most chaotic of social situations. And this dynamic is what definitively distances the Capra-Stanwycks from the early-thirties mainstream weepers. The weepers had exaggerated the social differences among the characters: the tarnished ladies could never become untarnished, even if some gentleman took pity on them and married them. Capra in his Stanwyck movies broke down the differences: love, for his characters, served to transcend social boundaries in the past and the present.

THERE'S AN INTENSITY about these movies, awkward though they are at times, that Capra never really recaptured. It's not the conventional intensity of the weeper; it's a more genuine urgency about emotions, which doesn't resemble anything else described on the screen at this time. Where Capra got his ideas about this kind of emotion is revealed in the movies themselves, especially in the second of them, *The Miracle Woman.* Capra wrote or co-wrote all these scripts (*The Miracle Woman* and *Forbidden* with Swerling; *The Bitter Tea* with Edward Paramore); and so he helped create the characters. In this, his second "Stanwyck," he drew the hero as an exaggerated version of himself ten years back, the wounded war veteran as blind aviator, who persists in wearing his army uniform way past the war, as Capra says he did himself.

Such an unmistakable Capra stand-in in *Miracle Woman* suggests that the whole Capra-Stanwyck oeuvre can be looked at as a sort of personal journal, worked out in narrative form, about the emotions of Capra's real-life love affair with Stanwyck. In *Ladies of Leisure* Capra "discovered" Stanwyck, and

the movie became the story of that discovery—an artist painting a portrait of his model, with whom he then falls in love. The success of *Ladies of Leisure* did not give Capra the personal reputation he had hoped for, but it made Stanwyck a star. And in *The Miracle Woman,* Capra cast Stanwyck as a star figure—as the lady preacher beloved of the masses, with her lover an abject, impaired version of himself. Following *The Miracle Woman,* Stanwyck apparently decided to save her failing marriage with Frank Fay, even though she was scheduled to do another movie with Capra, *Forbidden.* According to the trade papers, Stanwyck left the set during the filming of *Forbidden* to appear in a show with Fay in New York. *Forbidden* is an angry movie about a romance poisoned by middle-class conventions. Capra wrote the story himself (though not the dialogue), and it's the nearest he ever came to a mainstream weeper—with one violent twist at the end. The Stanwyck figure shoots and kills the man she has finally married, when he threatens harm to her lover.

Forbidden marked the end of whatever offscreen involvement Capra and Stanwyck had permitted themselves. After the movie, Stanwyck returned to Frank Fay (though she would divorce him a few years later), and Capra, who had divorced his first wife, married his second wife, Lucille. The final Capra-Stanwyck movie, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen,* concerns a pair of lovers, the American maiden and the warlord, who never can find a way to declare their love, no matter how much they may desire to—and it projects all the tenderness and aching regret of such a situation. Love's claims are frail indeed, the story implies, in a world where there is missionary work to be done. The movie doesn't pretend, like the weepers, that the affair ends because of something so sentimental as fate. The lovers in *General Yen* make clear choices at every turn. Stanwyck, the American, chooses to offer herself to Yen, the Chinese, even without marrying him. It's an extraordinary moment when she appears at his door, wearing the Chinese courtesan costume he has lent her, and then kneels, weeping, before him—it seems to break all of Hollywood's (then) unwritten codes: an unmarried woman actually gives in to her sexual longing for a man of another race. In response to her gesture, Yen chooses love too, but his love takes the form of protecting her, of refusing to stigmatize her among her own people. He has lost his war; his soldiers have all deserted him. She is at his feet. But instead of seeking solace with her, he sips the poison tea with which defeated generals are supposed to end their lives, and dies.

With *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* Capra and Stanwyck's professional collaboration, with its intimations of homespun poet and muse, came to an end (although they would work together later in one more movie, the confused *Meet John Doe,* 1940). Besides the real-life barriers between the two

of them, there were commercial disappointments to contend with: none of the later Capra-Stanwycks had done as well as the first one, *Ladies of Leisure.* The movies Capra had made in-between or just after the Stanwycks—*Dirigible* (1931), *Platinum Blonde* (1931), *American Madness* (1932), and *Lady for a Day* (1933)—were the ones that scored at the box office, even though they were not centered on romance. Moreover, by 1933 Stanwyck's own box-office appeal had fallen way off. That was natural enough: she was a weeper star. That genre declined so precipitously from 1932 to 1933 that the popularity of virtually all the weeper actresses—Garbo, Dietrich, Constance Bennett, Kay Francis, Ann Harding, Ruth Chatterton—plummeted.

Today, though, we can see that the persona Capra had created with Stanwyck in the course of those four movies was a stunning achievement. What Capra had gotten from Stanwyck was what a serious person gets from falling in love—a vivid sense of another psyche in the world, an effortless transference of one's own sensuality into that person's perceptions. Out of their collaboration had come a movie heroine who was not a scapegoat like a weeper heroine; she was a full protagonist. Things didn't happen *to* her, they happened *within* her. She was the one through whom the audience experienced the movie. And when romance came along and threatened to engulf her deepest self, she bravely let it in. *General Yen* is a parable whose subject is emotional bravery. How different was its Stanwyck from that other weeper heroine in China, the Dietrich of *Shanghai Express*! "It took more than one man to change my name to . . . Shanghai Lily," Dietrich tells her lost love, Clive Brook, when he reappears by chance on the Shanghai-bound train. *Shanghai Express* brings its ostensibly independent heroine back into marriage with the starched and stoic Brook. *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* allows its heroine to seriously contemplate an affair with a Chinese bandit. Sternberg's movie fades out on the reactionary weeper pair reviving their old love; Capra's movie closes on the face of Stanwyck headed toward an unknown, solitary future.

Although the Capra-Stanwyck muse-protagonist ostensibly disappeared from the movies (until *Meet John Doe,* and in that movie she was an impersonal, un-erotic version of her former self) she would live on in spirit in the role that brought the romantic-comedy heroine to vivid life, Claudette Colbert's Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night.* Capra, in working so consistently and intensely with Stanwyck, had developed the interior dynamic he needed to make the classic thirties heroine he created for Colbert. But it wasn't only Stanwyck who served as the model for Colbert's part. A new and unlikely movie star hit the scene just as Capra was ending his collaboration with Stanwyck, a star who challenged all kinds of popular assumptions about what a heroine should be.

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IN FEBRUARY 1933, a month after the release of *The Bitter Tea of General Yen,* Paramount unveiled Mae West's first starring vehicle for herself, *She Done Him Wrong,* about a lady saloon keeper in the gay nineties. The movie struck a fatal blow to the weeper and everything it stood for. In October 1933 Mae West's second original effort (actually, her third movie) emerged, *I'm No Angel,* about a lady lion tamer who makes it big on Broadway. Both movies were written and partially directed by Mae. And both movies, to the astonishment of Hollywood, swept all before them at the box office and made her the biggest star of the year.

Everything about Mae West spelled the opposite of doom. She was a synthesis of brash female vaudeville headliners like Eva Tanguay and Sophie Tucker, with a dimension borrowed from the great black blues singers of the twenties like Ida Cox and Bessie Smith (Mae admits in her autobiography to spending long hours in Chicago blues clubs), and a liberal dose of mannerisms lifted directly from Clara Bow. Bow played a snake dancer in a carnival in her last movie, *Hoopla* (1933), just as Mae did in *I'm No Angel* later that same year. In her own screen persona, Mae amplified these paradoxes: she directed the camera to emphasize her porcelain plumpness and her Nordic platinum hair, while she swaggered, smirked, and rolled her eyes like a Negro blues singer or an overripe flapper. Here was a hybrid that mixed the outlaw qualities of black women and wild women with the delicate complexion of the old-time melodrama heroine. What's astonishing is how much, in the context of mainstream Hollywood, this somewhat camouflaged but potentially disruptive creature got away with, in both *She Done Him Wrong* and *I'm No Angel.* Her lady bartender in *Wrong* and her lady lion tamer in *Angel* did what they wanted, dressed as they pleased, made overtures to whomever they wished, exposed all the other characters as hypocrites, prudes, snobs, and fops—and still found true, if tongue-in-cheek, romance with Cary Grant.

The narrative triumphs of Mae West's characters were especially resonant in 1933, when the Senate had begun its investigations of Wall Street malpractices and Prohibition, with its attendant hypocrisy, was about to be repealed. Mae obviously meant *She Done Him Wrong* to be anti-Prohibition and *I'm No Angel* to be antiwealth. (She came from a Brooklyn family with a traditional allegiance to Tammany Hall's "wet" working-class neighborhoods.) But Mae West wasn't the only unlikely social critic to emerge in the movies at this time. In early 1933 Warner Bros. revived the movie musical, which had all but disappeared in 1931 and '32, restyling it for Depression audiences with new topical content and new character types. The most vital

figure in *42nd Street* (March) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (June) was the precocious gold digger–chorine, impersonated by ingenues Ginger Rogers, Una Merkel, Joan Blondell, or Aline MacMahon with some junior Mae West touches.

The gold digger–chorine was cynical by nature. She lived in what she saw as a rotten world. But she mocked and resisted the rottenness all the time with wisecracks, and she kept her own decent values squarely in place. This character wasn't supposed to be realistic. She was a composite. She contained some 1920s Ziegfeld girl, a lot of Clara Bow, some weeper-tough-girl in the Warner Bros. mode; but, even more important, she shared—she recreated—Mae West's taste for irreverence in formal situations. Ginger Rogers's Fay Fortune of *Gold Diggers of 1933,* for instance, sang the movie's opening song, "We're in the Money," in pig Latin; this went with her monocle and her goofy pretensions. (And Ginger herself invented the gag on the set.) Such a devil-may-care juvenile heroine signaled the absorption into the movies of a younger and tougher generation of actresses who had survived the Depression slump in the entertainment business. It seemed right that she should be more knowing and scornful than most other leading ladies who had preceded her. Even the weeper heroines seemed innocent beside her. And in 1933, the Depression's lowest point, a dose of defiant female scorn seemed to be the catharsis the public wanted most. At the end of the year, not only had it put Mae West's *She Done Him Wrong* into first place among box-office draws, it had made MGM's *Tugboat Annie,* starring the large and raucous Marie Dressler, the second-largest-grossing movie; *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street* the third and fourth, respectively; and RKO's *Little Women,* featuring, in the role of the obstreperous Jo, that studio's newest young star, Katharine Hepburn, the fifth.

IN 1933, two short stories about young women on Greyhound buses, both by the pulp fiction writer, Samuel Hopkins Adams, appeared in magazines. The first, in the March *Collier's,* was a one-page piece called "Last Trip": it featured a forlorn and suicidal secretary cheered by an encounter on a bus with an equally despairing young man. The second, "Night Bus," which appeared in the August *Cosmopolitan,* was a much longer, less melancholy story about a runaway heiress and an inventor. Both stories can be considered sources for *It Happened One Night.* Capra mentions only one story in his autobiography, but says he came upon it in the *spring* of '33 while in Palm Springs working on the script for *Lady for a Day.* That was the date of the first story—and that first story would have suggested Barbara Stanwyck to him. It had the brave "woman traveling alone" theme he associated with her.

The story on which he actually based the movie, however, was the second one, whose heroine is not a Stanwyck type at all, but a robust and haughty heiress, deigning to travel on a plebeian long-distance bus to spite her overpossessive father. Her lover in the story is a penniless inventor, though of blueblood origins. Once again, Capra's instinct was working in top form. There was a new spirit in the air in the fall of 1933. Between spring and fall of that year—between these two bus stories by the same author—the public had absorbed not only Roosevelt's fireside chats and his relief plans for the jobless, but also Mae West and the gold-digger musicals. Capra obviously recognized that a new heroine, more hardy than his Stanwyck character, was needed in the movies, along with a new devil-may-care spirit. Accordingly, Capra found a new collaborator, the former Broadway playwright Robert Riskin (the author of the play Capra had based *The Miracle Woman* on) and set to work tailoring this second bus story for the movies.

But he didn't forget his watching and listening Stanwyck heroine. The Ellie Andrews of the movie is more tentative than the haughty Elspeth of the second story. Moreover, Capra and Riskin set it up so that she's more uprooted than Elspeth too. In Capra and Riskin's script, the heiress doesn't only play at evading her father, she actually escapes from a Florida yacht where he's imprisoned her for marrying the wrong man, and starts back to New York, incognito, on the Greyhound. Meanwhile, Capra and Riskin changed the inventor Peter Warne from a blueblood in disguise to an honest-to-goodness working person, a newspaper reporter. (For a while Capra had wanted his hero to be a painter like Ralph Graves in *Ladies of Leisure* but was persuaded by the more worldly Riskin, and by an ex-newspaperman friend, Myles Connolly, to toughen up his profession.)

Therefore, whether by instinct or intent, Capra created his new leading characters to correspond uncannily to the spirit of the moment. The man wouldn't be a sissy but a cynic. The woman wouldn't be too forlorn either. In fact, she would be partly unsympathic, at least at first. As the pure panic of the Depression leveled off to resentment, the extravagances of several ultrarich young debutantes made bitter reading for the masses—especially those of Woolworth granddaughter Barbara Hutton, who had married the shady Prince Alexis Mdivani against her father's will in June 1933, a few months before Riskin and Capra wrote their script. Miss Hutton had never subjected herself to the fears and discomforts of a Greyhound bus, but it was cathartic to wish that she might have to. Combining a Depression

scapegoat with a Depression victim in one character proved a brilliant stroke of plot invention.

It created a problem in casting, however. Where was the actress with both the wit and the pathos to switch back and forth between imperious heiress and diffident waif? Almost no female stars in Hollywood in 1933 called themselves comediennes. The young gold-digger chorines—Rogers, Blondell, Merkel—were listed only as featured players. Stars in 1933 had for two years played mostly weeper roles, which called for anything but irony. Some of the younger weeper heroines had shown flashes of mischief here and there. To them, one after another, Capra submitted his script, still with the unglamorous working title *Night Bus.* First he tried MGM's young veteran of exotic vamp roles, Myrna Loy; then Paramount's only comic ingenue, Miriam Hopkins; then Universal's recent Broadway import Margaret Sullavan; finally he approached RKO-Pathé's former top weeper star, Constance Bennett. All of them turned him down. (RKO's Irene Dunne wasn't considered because she hadn't yet done anything labeled as comedy; neither were Paramount's Carole Lombard—she was still too small-time.) No actress outside of Columbia could have known what freshness and care Capra, a Poverty Row director, would bring to the task of directing a woman, because no one in Hollywood had paid much attention to the unprofitable Capra-Stanwyck movies that had followed *Ladies of Leisure.* Consequently, the *Night Bus* script looked to its readers much too thin: nothing happened in it except that a woman met a man on a bus—and the woman changed costume only once in the whole picture. A self-respecting actress did not make a picture in just two costumes. The project might have died on the spot if Louis B. Mayer of MGM hadn't sent his recalcitrant young star Clark Gable over to do the male part in the picture, as a punishment for Gable's request for a raise.

Gable's immediate effect on the movie was to sweeten it for the last actress Capra approached, a Paramount featured player, Claudette Colbert. Though Colbert still blamed Capra for the flop of her first movie, the 1927 silent *For the Love of Mike,* which he had directed, she had shrewdly assessed her middling position among her peers at Paramount—Miriam Hopkins, Carole Lombard, Nancy Carroll, not to speak of Dietrich and West. She had also noticed her studio's weak roster of male stars: Gary Cooper was its only bright spot amid such aging figures as Maurice Chevalier, Harold Lloyd, and George Bancroft. In addition to whatever financial arrangement Capra offered her, Colbert realized that doing a movie with a strong young male co-star might make Paramount notice her. She accepted Capra's movie because Gable was in it.

Colbert was a dramatically different kind of actress from Barbara Stanwyck. Born Lily Claudette Chauchoin in France in 1905, she had come to New York at the age of six when her banker father failed in his Paris business and decided to try America; he died soon after. Finishing high school, Colbert needed a career to help support her mother and brother. She was studying to be a fashion designer when she met the playwright Anne Nichols at a party in 1923. Nichols, author of the cross-religion Broadway blockbuster *Abie's Irish Rose,* gave her a bit part in her new play, *White Collars,* and Colbert went from there into a long apprenticeship in the old-fashioned farces of producer Al Woods, working her way back, by the end of the twenties, to contemporary comic roles on Broadway. She sported a witty, polished technique instead of the "natural" intensity of a Stanwyck. Soubrette roles such as the ingenue snake charmer in her 1927 Broadway hit, *The Barker,* became her specialty. (Colbert once gave an interview proclaiming her preference for Sarah Bernhardt over Eleonora Duse—this in the days when Duse's naturalism had supplanted Bernhardt's high-toned artifice as the height of Broadway chic.) Having given up movies after the 1927 lemon, *For the Love of Mike,* she made a smooth transition back into them in 1929, becoming the main star of Paramount's East Coast studio in Astoria, Queens, and playing Astoria's specialty: Depression debutantes thrown out on the job market.

In 1932, when Paramount shut down its East Coast facilities, Colbert moved to the Hollywood lot, only to find herself shunted aside by the up-and-coming starlets already positioned on the Paramount roster. Colbert, with her round face, wide smile, and mischievous eyes, was not considered a beauty; she was a wit. Wits, though, were not in demand in weeper-dominated Hollywood. Cecil B. DeMille rescued her in 1933 by "discovering" her on the Paramount lot and starring her in his lascivious ancient epics *The Sign of the Cross* (1933) and *Cleopatra* (1934); but by doing so he almost consigned her permanently to the domain of "camp." *It Happened One Night* would rescue her in turn from DeMille's orbit. Sooner or later, though, Colbert would have rescued herself. Behind her charming exterior there lurked a shrewd and self-promoting mind. In signing with Capra she was simply seizing an opportunity that other actresses failed to recognize. Still, she was lucky that Capra saw through her charm to the intelligence that controlled it. He would make full use of Colbert's "hidden" willfulness in the role of the heiress-waif that he tailored, in his customary way, to fit her.

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THE MOVIE OPENS aboard a yacht, lying in a sunny sea. But this idyllic yacht is anything but peaceful. The tycoon's rebellious daughter, Ellie Andrews, has locked herself in her stateroom, refusing to eat. We first see Colbert backed against the stateroom wall, her heart-shaped face with the pencil-thin eyebrows expressing dismay, as her worried, portly father (played by character actor Walter Connolly) brings in a tray of food. We scarcely have time to follow the argument between father and daughter about her new husband before Colbert upsets the food tray. Her father slaps her. A swift cut to Colbert's surprised face tells us it's the first time this father has ever slapped this daughter. In the heat of the moment she bolts through the door, onto the deck, up onto the railing—and with a beautiful, high athletic dive she's into the sea and swimming away. The sunlit close-ups of her climbing onto the railing fill the foreground of the screen, while the quick cuts to her father reveal him behind her on the shaded deck, helpless, calling his staff to watch for her in train stations and airports. The wit of this scene (which was created by Capra and Riskin, not Adams) reverts back to the mechanisms of silent comedy, where the action emanated from a stylized central character. Perhaps it was the rise of Mae West that allowed Capra to rediscover the comedy dynamic in a woman. But it was also Claudette Colbert herself.

Barbara Stanwyck would never have inspired such an opening scene. Stanwyck's effectiveness in Capra's work had depended on the visible inwardness of her reactions, on a stubbornness that proved ultimately mournful. Colbert offered Capra an imperious energy and a comically opaque characterization. And yet the Stanwyck and the Colbert characters are related. Compare Stanwyck's Kay Arnold at the end of *Ladies of Leisure,* jumping into the sea to drown, with Colbert's Ellie Andrews at the start of *It Happened One Night,* diving into the sea to escape. Capra must have been struck by what Colbert, with her wealth of pre-Hollywood stage work, could do that Stanwyck couldn't: mock herself. She could sketch in a presence with a few swift, stylized strokes—the wide eyes, the asymmetrical slouches, the pouting, honeyed voice that turned a simple line about her marriage like "I'm over twenty-one and so is he" into a slightly risqué song. She could put a Mae Westian spirit into a domestic quarrel.

Colbert's artificiality allowed Capra to treat his essential theme, Depression rootlessness, in a less serious manner than he would have needed for Stanwyck. When the scene switches to the bus station, introduced by a humble little sign, NIGHT BUS TO NEW YORK, and discovers Colbert mute and wide-eyed, wedged into a corner of the screen, the audience has been invited to contemplate the artificiality of the movie itself. We can see that Colbert is acting a part-within-a-part, a waif imagined by an heiress imagined by an actress. But we recognize as well that this ironic figure of the heiress has been superimposed on, almost pasted over, a kind of image that didn't usually go with her—a pseudodocumentary evocation of a shabby Depression bus station. The playfulness of such a juxtaposition allows the movie to float free of weeper sentimentality. A situation from the Capra-Stanwyck weepers with an infusion of Mae Westian artifice: this was the romantic-comedy formula that coalesced in this movie.

Having brought the heiress to the bus, the movie temporarily deserts her. The camera, as if distracted by a ruckus, does one of Capra's dizzying strides across space to discover a crowd collected around a phone booth, watching a tall man conducting a drunken argument into the telephone. Here is Colbert's opposite number, Clark Gable, wedged into the booth, a soft felt hat on his head and his eyebrows hopping up and down as he talks to his editor in New York. Audiences of 1934 would have recognized this type from Hollywood's 1932–33 newspaper comedies (relatives of the gangster pictures) as well as from tales of legendary journalists like Richard Harding Davis, H. L. Mencken, Ben Hecht, Gene Fowler, and Ernest Hemingway: the rogue newsman who was as rascally, soused, and undependable as he was talented. The script needed only to include a few lines of his invective to his editor—"That was free verse, you gashouse palooka!"—to peg him as an American caricature even more familiar than the heiress.

But Capra also drew on real-life material to shape Gable's role, as he had done for Colbert's. According to Capra, when Gable first reported to Columbia on Louis B. Mayer's orders, he came drunk—a kind of compliance that also signals rebellion. That's how he is portrayed in his movie entrance (which doesn't appear in the magazine story), locked in a tipsy telephone battle with a fatherlike newspaper editor. Both main characters, introduced symmetrically in opposite corners of the bus station, have embarked on fatherless escapades, just as Gable and Colbert in real life had ventured out of their paternalistic studios to make a movie with a "small-time" director on Poverty Row. Capra blends these cinema-verité details into the scripted story, as he had done in the Stanwyck movies. The new dimension in *It Happened One Night* came from the cultural resonance of the types Gable and Colbert were playing, the heiress and the reporter.

SINCE IT WAS the Depression, the more plebeian reporter had an edge over the heiress. Capra had worked with these two types already in one of his lighter early-thirties movies, *Platinum Blonde* (1931), in which he had married an heiress (Jean Harlow) to a reporter (Robert Williams), then

turned their relationship into a coy class war fixed in favor of the reporter. But *It Happened One Night* proved much more complex in treating the same two figures. It distributed attributes of power more evenly between them, as the Capra-Stanwyck films had done with their co-stars. Colbert's heiress possesses social power as her father's daughter but becomes just a solitary, vulnerable woman on the bus trip. Gable's reporter stands socially "beneath" an heiress in the regular world but becomes her manly protector on the bus trip. The bus's milieu turns Colbert's class ascendancy into Gable's gender ascendancy, then reverses that configuration too, as the woman shows herself more resourceful than the man and the man grows more tender than the woman. For all its intricacies, the movie displays a breezy, offhand air. Capra made it, as he said, like "a throwaway game of golf," right after he finished what he thought was a masterpiece, *Lady for a Day,* about the fantasies of an old-lady apple seller. (Actually, *Lady for a Day* is a heavy-handed movie, in part because Capra thought it was important while he was shooting it. The projects he thought unimportant were the ones that usually turned out to be better movies.)

Even before Gable and Colbert meet, Capra gives us a taste of how their temperaments will square off, in an incident cleverly reproduced from the story. Gable enters the bus and finds only one seat free in the back, though newspapers are piled on it. He throws the papers out the window, an act that embroils him in an altercation with the bus driver. That's when Colbert slips behind them through the frame and takes the seat. This moment registers like a jazz duet, with Gable as saxophone and Colbert as clarinet: it prefigures the way his blustering will later succumb to her quick efficiency. Face to face, though, in this early scene, Gable and Colbert veer back and forth between class friction and sexual attraction. Gable chastises Colbert for her squeamishness about bus crowding. He turns gentleman to chase a thief who steals Colbert's suitcase. Colbert turns lady and offers Gable money. Provoked, he sheds his manners and calls her a brat. Back in the bus, Gable chivalrously rescues Colbert from a vulgar seatmate, but he does so in working-class style by claiming her as his wife.

In 1934, the audience's own confusions would have made Gable's and Colbert's role-switching seem familiar. Men in the audience had lost their jobs; women had gone to work. What's striking today is to see how the characters' shifts of status, especially the heiress's, determine the movie's very structure. Capra all but shaped the movie around Ellie Andrews's duality, making her stand, in sleight-of-hand fashion, for privilege and helplessness at the same time. Even as the plot is humbling the heiress, the visual underpinning of the movie is evoking sympathy for the woman, telling us through pictures about the loneliness, the vastness, the underclass



Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night.*

pathos of her first Depression bus trip. The shiny black chrome of the bus at the gate, with its several licenses piled at off angles on its right fender, its lit headlights, the labels NEW YORK and ATLANTIC GREETINGS arching over its front windows—all recall the piled-up, handmade signs in the documentary photographs of the Depression by artist-photographers like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. Capra could not have copied these photographers, though, since their pictures weren't widely visible until the Farm Security Administration began to commission and distribute them in 1935, nearly two years after *It Happened One Night.*

Capra seems to have made up his Depression aesthetic by himself, from newsreels, from the images of poverty in the Stanwyck movies, from memories of his own wanderings in the twenties. Samuel Hopkins Adams had set up the situation of the bus trip, but he hadn't lingered on the visual background of his story. Capra clothed Hopkins's story in pictures that were responsive to the bleakness of the times. Unlike the rhapsodically modern blimps and airplanes of his earlier naval epics, the bus in *It Happened One Night* appears makeshift and anthropomorphized, as do its surroundings. When Capra shows a nighttime rest stop—a trailer with a neon HOT DOGS written on it—he takes care to picture it small, floating in a vast space of dark highway. And he follows this with a shot of Colbert at the rest stop, leaning against the bus, smoking, with the listless, suspended quality of any Depression photographer's subject. Here is where Capra links the Colbert figure to social upheaval, as he had done with Stanwyck's characters. She's traveling alone through Depression America, finding out who she is under her heiress façade, coming to a sense of her personal autonomy through her uncertainty.

Ellie Andrews's isolation from her usual surroundings leads her, as isolation led the Stanwyck heroines, to love—in a pair of scenes that relate directly to Capra's Stanwyck movies. The passengers are forced by a storm to spend the night in an auto court. Gable, again playing the reluctant gentleman, takes Colbert in charge and rents a cabin for both of them. Colbert runs through the downpour into the cabin. We see her in profile against the door; we register its glass knob and chintz half-curtains even as we note her mute dismay at having to spend the night with a strange man. This moment recalls the scene in *Ladies of Leisure* when Stanwyck agrees to spend the night in Ralph Graves's penthouse—and the connection was intended by Capra. According to Colbert, this was the only time in the rapid shooting schedule that he redid something, because he had decided she didn't look "scared enough." She had played the scene, she says, "with bravado, as if she [Ellie Andrews] still knew what time it was." What Capra

wanted was the vulnerability of a Stanwyck when Ralph Graves places a blanket on her.

He got this in the printed retake—Colbert's wary surveying of the setup with the twin beds, her uncertain wisecrack to Gable, "Darn clever, those Armenians." Colbert looks so wary, in fact, that Capra broke the pathos with some comic relief. He had Gable hang a blanket between their beds and start taking off his clothes, to get her to go to her side of the room. But the comedy doesn't obscure the familiar Capraesque poetry of what follows—a shot-by-shot reprise of the lightly pornographic "night" poem to Barbara Stanwyck in *Ladies of Leisure:* the same backlit rainy window, the female's torso silhouetted against it, the pensive undressing, the reverse view of the woman through the window, the close-up of her face and hands as she lies in bed—even the pajamas the man lends the woman to sleep in (a detail from Adams's story that matched Capra's own narrative conventions). Here Colbert's Ellie Andrews becomes practically a reincarnation of *Ladies of Leisure*'s Kay Arnold.

THE CONTRADICTIONS INSIDE ELLIE, her heiress's courage alternating with her waif's fear, make her "realer" than other Hollywood heroines of her day. But the Gable character also breaks with the stock leading-man image. The morning that follows the night in the auto court of *It Happened One Night* echoes the morning in the *Ladies of Leisure* penthouse four years earlier, but with a substantial shift: it's not the woman who's cooking the eggs in this scene—it's the man. One could say that this moment, with Colbert still in bed and Gable at the stove, marks the long-delayed birth of a hero suitable for the Depression. Capra didn't plan it this way: he merely played Gable against the grain of his semisadistic MGM image, to show him cooking eggs, laying the table, buying the groceries while Ellie slept (as Adams had indicated). But a domestically inclined man offered an alternative to the misogynous gangster-newsman who was hanging on at Warner Bros. and the fastidious Arrow-collar man who lingered at MGM. Gable's Peter Warne, unlike those outdated stereotypes, has no pretenses to social power. He's broke; he's out of a job; he can't even run fast enough to catch the guy who stole Ellie's suitcase. He's a surprisingly frank embodiment of the ineffectuality of the American male in the face of the Depression. He can do only one thing well: take care of someone who's lost.

They're a curious couple—he keeping house, she appreciating it like a lost kid. Capra has mixed up their class and gender traits to make a new model of the American couple. The man isn't always supermanly; the woman isn't

always ultrafemale. Each possesses qualities that should by convention belong to the other. This movie was Capra's last entry in his Capra-Stanwyck diary, completing the revision of "male" and "female" he had started in the Stanwyck movies, a revision that allows for frequent role reversals and class trade-offs. Colbert's waif-heiress becomes the finished cartoon of the figure who haunted him in the Stanwyck movies—the big star who is also a woman. Gable's reporter becomes the cartoon of the Capra figure in the Stanwyck movies—the man who has both more and less power than the heroine. Gable brought an easy erotic charisma to his part that smoothed out the habitual nervousness of those earlier Capra stand-ins, Stanwyck's co-stars. As Gable portrayed him, this gruff-tender man in *It Happened One Night,* without money or position of his own but with the natural authority to put the heiress on a budget, tell her what to eat, have her clothes ironed, and coax a story out of her for his newspaper, is an allegorical simplification of what Capra actually was, a director of movie stars.

Peter Warne even coaches Ellie in a mock movie scene, when her fathers' detectives come looking for her in the auto court. He musses her hair, undoes her collar, and cues her in a loud, bullying voice. She catches on and pretends to be a rowdy wife arguing with her Cracker husband. Such a moment invites the audience backstage to witness Hollywood's mystical secrets. These are actors playing roles—sometimes even roles within roles. And Capra's use of documentary-style backgrounds further heightens his characters' artificiality. When Colbert hippity-hops to the shower through a set that looks like a newsreel of a Hooverville, with cabins, refuse, children, dogs, women lined up in bathrobes, we see two worlds juxtaposed on the screen, privilege and poverty. And we have the illusion, which must have thrilled the 1934 movie audience, that poverty is instructing privilege.

One could say that *It Happened One Night* amounts to an ingenious effort by Capra to get privileged people (including movie stars and directors) taken back into the plebeian American heart. That impulse was present in the Capra-Stanwycks too, in that one of the two leads always represented the People, as a missionary or a politician—a reminder to the audience that power could be benign. But *It Happened One Night* rounds out the fable. The hardship of the bus trip abolishes social classes and turns everyone into members of a giant, "economy class" community. In what can be seen as the heart of the movie (a scene not present in the story), the bus's congregation erupts in a spontaneous rendition of "The Man on the Flying Trapeze." Different passengers sing different verses, but everybody, including Gable and Colbert in their double seat, joins in happily. It would read as a terminally corny image of disparates united by pop culture except that it,

too, is undercut by irony: just as the driver joins in the chorus, he loses control of the wheel and the bus veers off the road into the mud.

IT SEEMS HERE as if a foundering ship of state had spilled Gable and Colbert into the landscape to fend for themselves. Actually, they leave the bus because one of the passengers has found out that Colbert is the heiress Ellie Andrews. But once they strike out on foot with no money, the movie enters a new phase (indicated in the story, but not developed)—a lyrical extension of the narrative, a kind of interlude that would turn up in the best romantic comedies throughout the decade, which might be called a Depression pastorale. They cross a moonlit stream; they sleep—apart—in a haystack; they hitchhike on a rural highway; they get picked up in an old Model T and taken to a Walker Evans café. Narratively the sequence explores the territory beyond the Capra-Stanwyck equation, beyond falling in love. It's like practice for marriage—Capra's Depression-style marriage—with the woman learning to do unladylike things and the man learning to appreciate some competition from a raffish mate. Gable isn't the one who gets them a ride, despite his professorial demonstration of the three methods of hitchhiking; Colbert does. Tossing off one of Mae West's many mottos, "I've got a system all my own," she ambles nonchalantly onto the road, slides up her skirt to show some leg—and stops a car.

By now, the two actors seem to be soaring on inventiveness: Colbert almost goofy, nibbling raw carrots, limping down the road beside Gable, letting him pick a piece of hay out of her teeth; Gable ruefully macho, shooting seductive looks at passing autos and pulling up dumbfounded as the cars pass him. This is where the surreal, buoyant, all-but-improvised couple-acting that would attach itself to romantic comedy was born. How fresh it must have looked to audiences who had been fed, weeper-style, lovemaking-in-the-mist of trench-coated stars! And the visually shrewd, weather-sensitive Capra, who shrouded his movie's beginnings in darkness and rain, threw open this part of it to unpretentious daylight.

IF THE STORY had ended here, if Peter and Ellie had simply run off and gotten married, *It Happened One Night* would be a charming little movie, not a prototype for a new genre. Capra and Riskin, prompted by Adams, added an ordeal for their couple that turned it into a parable about Americans both high- and middle-class growing up. Gable and Colbert, as they near the end of their journey in a commandeered Model T, cannot find a

way to declare their feelings. It's the woman who breaks the deadlock, as in the Capra-Stanwyck stories. Colbert creeps around the blanket "walls of Jericho" in another auto court and offers herself, sobbing, to Gable—like Stanwyck throwing herself at the feet of General Yen. Gable says nothing but sneaks away to write up their journey for his newspaper, so he can earn the money to propose to Colbert. This part of the movie is more melodrama than comedy, returning each character temporarily to the fate of an earlier genre. The proprietress of the auto court finds the deserted Colbert and supposes her compromised—the scourge of the weepers. Gable, hurrying back in the jalopy to claim her, sees the motorcade sent by her father to fetch her and returns to his old life—newspaperman barbarism. Each thinks the other a traitor to the experience they've just shared, and each keeps on thinking this until the last possible moment, which is the famous scene, made up for the movie, of Ellie's formal remarriage to her original playboy husband, King Westley.

Capra staged this in a documentary-style return to Barbara Hutton turf, a full-dress society wedding on the lawn of the Andrews mansion, complete with bridesmaids, ushers, flower girls, and—Capra's sly salute to a visual source—two newsreel cameramen cranking away on the roof. We see the long, slow procession cross the grass toward the altar. Capra draws it out, teasing the thirties audience, which would have blanched at the idea of interrupting such a costly ceremony. But there's a chance she can be saved, we see. Old Mr. Andrews, escorting his daughter toward the altar, tells her that Peter Warne is an okay guy—he's only asked for $39.60 in expenses, instead of a big reward. Still, Colbert does nothing, until the minister has addressed the groom and had his answer, then turned to the bride with the question "Wilt thou take this man to be thy wedded husband, as long as ye both shall live?" At this moment, Colbert heaves her chest, bites her lip, shakes her head, and breaks away across the sloping lawn, her long white veil streaming behind her, running down to a car waiting at the gate (presumably with Gable in it). Scenes of her flight are interspersed with cuts to the newsreel photographers, madly rotating their cameras to catch her moving image. The sequence provides an ingenious climax—a reprise of Colbert's initial escape from the yacht, but with a new dimension represented by the newsreel cameras. The first escape was an impulsive, "private" act, witnessed only by the movie audience; the second one, no matter how split-second and dramatic, is a "public" decision recorded on a newsreel-within-the-film. Colbert has grown up from heiress to citizen.

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THE RUNAWAY BRIDE is one of the most joyous, kinetic, and rebellious images produced by mass culture in the Depression. What she signifies is the end of the extravagant, wasteful, snobbish life of the upper classes of the twenties. In rushing away from her wedding, she is unclassing herself to join with Peter Warne in a new kind of unit held together by something besides class. The last image of the movie, the "walls of Jericho" falling down, refers to the real meaning of their marriage—not social but erotic, private. Here is one of the only moments in Hollywood's history when a proper wedding stood for something undesirable: six or seven years later, when war threatened, on-camera weddings would regain their sentimental power. Though Capra diluted the impact of this moment by making old man Andrews of Wall Street instrumental in his daughter's escape, he still put a vital populist message into a Hollywood artifact. *It Happened One Night* makes a cross-class love affair between two consenting adults, begun on a bus, stand for a renewal of democracy.

The strong-willed lovers that peopled Capra's neo-weepers with Barbara Stanwyck had survived, comicalized, as the leading characters of a movie fable that was custom-made, through trial and error and brilliant cinematic instinct, to speak to the anxieties of the Depression audience. *It Happened One Night* contained profound cultural resonances at the time it was made. As the lovers negotiate equality across the gulf of class and gender, they are metaphorically healing the painful divisions in American society. But, though they match each other by the end in self-knowledge and goodwill, it is still the woman who controls the action. She is the one who had set the plot in motion at the beginning and the one who saves the romance at the end. It is true that the male protagonist, Gable's Peter Warne, is asked to take a stand at a crucial point in the movie: he must choose between the heiress and a life of debauchery. His choosing the heiress, however, doesn't generate the movie's climax. That comes when Colbert's Ellie Andrews realizes that she too has a choice. One of her suitors offers her upper-class status; the other offers her sex—and companionship, adventure, and good, cheap fun. She chooses sex, which all Americans had potentially in common, over class, which they didn't.