# "The Forgotten Man" 1932–1940:
## Four American Movies from the Decade of the Great Depression

A Film Series Presented in Conjunction with the

## Hallie Ford Museum of Art

Exhibition

***Forgotten Stories: Northwest Public Art of the 1930s***

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# *My Man* Godfrey

Director: **Gregory La Cava**. Producer: **Gregory La Cava**. Screenplay: **Morrie Ryskind**, **Gregory La Cava** and **Eric Hatch**; based on the novel of the same name by **Eric Hatch**. Cinematographer: **Ted Tetzlaff**. Editor: **Ted Kent**. Art Direction: **Charles D. Hall**. Costume Design: **Travis Banton**. Original Music: **Charles Previn** and **Rudy Schrager**. Universal Pictures, 1936. 94 minutes.

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| Godfrey Parke | **William Powell** |
| Irene Bullock | **Carole Lombard** |
| Angelica Bullock | **Alice Brady** |
| Cornelia Bullock | **Gail Patrick** |
| Alexander Bullock | **Eugene Pallette** |
| Carlo | **Mischa Auer** |
| Molly | **Jean Dixon** |
| Tommy Gray | **Alan Mowbray** |

***My Man Godfrey*** is a dream of a movie, a treat for the eyes and the ears, with rich black-and-white photography, magnificent Art Deco set designs, satin gowns, fluid camera movements, wisecracks, and ironic wit. It stars the great Carole Lombard – a pioneer of daffy dialogue delivery in screwball comedies – playing a rich socialite.

Let's begin with a few introductory notes regarding settings, costumes, lighting, and contrasts, all worth your close attention in watching and enjoying this movie. As the film opens, we learn that Lombard's character Irene is out on the town in Manhattan, on a high society scavenger hunt. Dressed in a glittering silver evening gown, she is about to search a dumpsite for a tramp. Among the random items needed for her to win the scavenger hunt and triumph over her mean sister, Cornelia (Gail Patrick), she must find "a forgotten man" to bring back to the ritzy charity ball. President Franklin Roosevelt had referred to "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid" four years earlier in a radio address in 1932. The phrase expressed Roosevelt's deep sympathy and understanding for what the nation's economic collapse had done to the average American. Roosevelt's "forgotten man" phrase resonated with Americans and still had a currency in 1936. The casual and callous use of "forgotten man" at this high-class, extravagant charity affair at the "Waldorf-Ritz" is problematic, as we will soon see.

The acerbic "forgotten man" Lombard locates is superbly played by William Powell, Lombard's ex-husband off-screen. In an unusually decent gesture by an ex-husband, Powell was willing to accept the role of Godfrey only if his ex, Lombard, was brought over from Paramount, loaned to Universal Pictures, and given the role of Irene. She was, and ***My Man Godfrey*** was a box office smash. That popular success, plus an Oscar nomination for Lombard's performance as Best Actress, made her a major star.

The city dumpsite that Irene enters to scavenge for a convenient tramp is no picnic. This Depression-era film pulls no punches. On a precipitous slope under a bridge we are shown the co-mingling of garbage trucks dumping their loads, mountains of trash, and forgotten men – human refuse, surplus labor, cast-offs, the homeless. The tone is very dark for a comedy, and the picture of deprivation presented to us is unsparing. The contrast with the elegant extravagance and high jinks of the charity ball participants who burst upon this grim setting is starkly presented. Lombard is costumed and carefully lighted in such a way that Irene appears to be aglow, matching her spirited nature, and glittering with prestige, certifying that she is spectacularly out of place. As to the shabby "forgotten man" she meets there, the subdued lighting on William Powell is markedly low key, assuring that he blends with the murky, dark trash. It's a dark picture of him, visually eloquent, suggesting that he will not likely be able to transcend his bleak circumstances. Nothing short of divine intervention, perhaps, will help. In this magical, wish-fulfillment comedy, Irene's bizarre presence represents a miracle.

We will soon discover that ***My Man Godfrey*** is among the wackiest of the 1930s screwball romantic comedies, but from the beginning it is wise and political too. Among other things, it is a film about the income disparity in the U.S. that the Depression had widened and exposed. Depression audiences in 1936 deeply understood the film's depiction of deprivations and its contrasting images of access to money and power. ***My Man Godfrey*** has maintained its status over the years as a madcap screwball comedy, but the film has renewed currency as social criticism as we watch the movie in 2020, while the partial recovery from the Great Recession of 2007 slams into a Covid-19 pandemic. At this writing, an economic depression looms while Wall Street hits record highs. There is now growing national concern and debate about the growth of wealth disparity since 1974 to Depression-era levels today. Four decades of supply-side economic policies have undermined the earning power of the middle class and channeled immense wealth to the richest individuals and corporations.

More to come on what screwball comedy is and on the issue of income disparity. And, before we return to the film's opening sequence, let's take a moment to celebrate Carole Lombard, who is center stage in ***My Man Godfrey***. Lombard's career in movies began during the silent era, a fact not easy to assimilate, for if ever an actress was suited for sound movies and frantic, rapid-fire dialogue comedies, it was Carole Lombard. It is difficult to imagine her silent or muted. The following appreciation of Lombard's comic style and career is comprised of two excerpts from critic Dan Calahan's review of several Lombard movies that appeared in *Slant Magazine* in 2006:

> At her breathless, frazzled, sexy best, Carole Lombard defined the screwball comedy genre of the 1930s. A hot blonde made for clinging white satin, she was most distinctive when encouraged to be slaphappy and out of control, working up a full head of steam and building comic sequences to crescendos of hysteria. Her basic good nature always shone through her performances, so that even when her work was uneven (which was often), she always managed to get a viewer rooting for her. With her high forehead and penetrating blue eyes, Lombard was obviously intelligent, yet she had a talent for playing none-too-bright, childish women who lived exclusively and triumphantly in their own world….
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> …Lombard can never sit still for an instant or her doubts and fears will overtake her, and this sense of danger made her the best-loved comedienne of her era. Her last film was a masterpiece, Ernst Lubitsch's bold ***To Be or Not To Be***, where she takes chances with moods and intonations that most actresses would blanch at. After that appropriately risky summit, she died in a plane crash coming back from a war bond tour. Lombard had avoided death before in one freak accident and always carried the mark on her face afterward. This gave her a special kind of turbulence that filled her comedies with depth of feeling. When death finally caught up with her no one could say Lombard hadn't led her cruel fate on a taunting, merry chase.
>
> —Dan Calahan

The Internet Movie Data Base's page on Carole Lombard provides more details about her shocking, untimely death:

> Her last film work was during 1941, when she played Maria Tura opposite Jack Benny in controversial comedy ***To Be or Not to Be***. Lombard and Benny play hammy, self-absorbed Polish actors in a small theatrical troupe who join the underground to thwart the occupying Nazis. Tragically, Lombard didn't live to see the film's release. The film was completed in 1941 just at the time the US entered World War II, and was subsequently held back for release until 1942. Meanwhile, Carole went home to Indiana for a war bond rally. On January 16, 1942, Lombard, her mother, and 20 other people were flying back to California when the plane went down outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. Lombard was returning from an engagement selling War Bonds. All aboard perished. The highly acclaimed actress, the "Queen of Screwball Comedy," was dead at the age of 33, and few have been able to match her talents since. Her film with Jack Benny was in post-production when she died, and the producers decided to leave out a part that had her character asking, "What can happen in a plane?" The Jack Benny radio show that followed her death was cancelled because Benny, a good friend and admirer, was grief-stricken. The time was filled with music instead.
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> The decision to take that flight was decided on the flip of a coin, with Carole winning the toss, permitting her to choose the plane over the train her publicist preferred. The plane they took was a military convoy, which made several stops in order to pick up troops. After the first stop in Las Vegas, an officer requested Carole, her mother and publicist to get off the plane to make room for more troops. Carole reportedly argued with him, stating the fact that she had raised more than half a million dollars in war bonds and had the right to stay on. The officer finally conceded, and shortly after, the plane crashed, on a clear night, into the side of Table Mountain in a range on the eastern slope of Death Valley.
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> Carole Lombard was posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the first woman killed in the line of duty in WWII. Roosevelt greatly admired her work for the war effort… .
>
> — Internet Movie Data Base

Let's return to the beginning of ***My Man Godfrey***, and to the contrast between rich and poor that is being presented. Elizabeth Kendall devotes a chapter to ***My Man Godfrey*** in her excellent 1990 book *The Runaway Bride, Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s*. She notes that Gregory La Cava—who directed, produced, and shared in the writing of the film—had studied painting earlier in his career at the Art Students League in Manhattan, under artist George Bellows, one of the group of painters known as New York Realists. The New York Realists, such as Bellows, Robert Henri, and John Sloan, were also known as 'the Ashcan school" for their somber depiction of poverty and often gritty scenes in urban streets, boxing arenas, and alleys. It's worth noting that ***My Man Godfrey*** begins with art, an illustrated animation of a glamorous city skyline, the credits displayed as advertising signage reflected in the bay. The camera pans right to follow the skyline as it transitions from a glittering depiction to an "ash can school" rendering of a city dump beneath a bridge, which morphs (via a dissolve) into the real thing. Below author Elizabeth Kendall discusses ***My Man Godfrey***'s opening sequence, illuminating how the film's politics and morality are rooted in the settings, the characters, and in the contrast (and conflict) between them:

> It's a beautiful first scene. The gleam of the cars, the fires in the garbage dump, the glint of light on the tin cans become the background for a clash of personalities. All the social suggestiveness of the scenery is borne out when Patrick's debutante insults Powell's down-and-outer. She offers him five dollars to be the "forgotten man" in a scavenger hunt. He refuses, backing her into a heap of trash. She retreats up the hill in a huff, but Lombard is left behind. "Who are you?" says Powell, almost bumping into her. "I'm Irene. That was my sister Cornelia you pushed in the ash pile," says Lombard. Powell orders her to sit down, and they hold a conversation, profile to profile, the light softening his face and gleaming on the shoulders of her silver evening cape. We are reassured in this opening encounter that Powell's burn isn't dangerous, only fair and reasonable in populist style: he believes that rich people should be humiliated for discourteous treatment

> of poor people. And soon, despite his bum's costume, Powell becomes himself again on-screen, the ironically courtly partner of leading ladies. He shifts the attention deftly to Lombard's Irene. Visually, she's a shimmering creature, with a magically pretty profile, like the "girl" in F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction of the twenties—the "girl" who meant money and delicacy and the good life. Temperamentally, she's an exaggeration of the spoiled heiress [played by Claudette Colbert] in ***It Happened One Night***: she has only the dimmest comprehension of what "rich" and "poor" mean. She asks Powell why he lives in a place like this when there are so many nicer places to live in. (He says the altitude is good for his asthma).

It is worth isolating a bit of the brilliant dialogue from this scene that occurs as the tramp and Irene sit and talk in the dark hobo camp (with their breath backlit and visible in the authentic chill of a night-for-night shot). When Powell's homeless man wants to know what a charity scavenger hunt is, Irene is happy to comply. The guileless definition of a scavenger hunt that Irene supplies (via Lombard's marvelous, run-on delivery) is simply priceless:

> Irene: "*Well, a scavenger hunt is exactly like a treasure hunt, except in a treasure hunt you try to find something you want and, in a scavenger, hunt you try to find something that nobody wants.*
> The tramp: "*Hm. Like a 'forgotten man.'* "
> Irene: "*That's right… and the one who wins gets a prize – only there really isn't a prize, it's just the honor of winning, because all the money goes to charity – that is, if there's any money left over, but then there never is.*"

It is often when confronted with contradictions that we are prompted to political awareness, and, as these words tumble from Irene's mouth, we see the beginning of her dawning moral development, as author Elizabeth Kendall notes, returning to her discussion of this sequence (from *The Runaway Bride*):

> With her wide eyes, her breathless tempo extended into anxious trail-offs, Lombard evokes not just a spoiled debutante but the whole barbaric–wealthy universe that has spoiled her. She can't concentrate very long on anything, and she's never encountered the enormous fact of the Depression. Prompted by Powell's professorial irony, however, she begins to articulate a rudimentary Depression morality. "You know I've decided I'm not going to play any more games with human beings as objects," she says in her breathless way. "It's kind of sordid when you think of it—I mean, when you think it over." We marvel that such impulses have sprouted in the palpable chaos of Irene's mind. But what seems clearest in this scene is how much of a child she still is, the way the silent comics in the twenties were children, with children's dismay when they have no power. Irene, we can see, is locked in a chronically losing battle with her domineering older sister. She's already told Powell that she's been wanting to push Cornelia into "an ash pile or something" ever since she was six years old. "Let's beat Cornelia," Powell says suddenly, making a quick decision to go with Irene to the scavenger hunt. This way he addresses her on a child's level, and at the same time gives her the first sign she's ever received that her cause, the cause of the powerless, is a good one to fight for… .
>
> — Elizabeth Kendall

At the Waldorf-Ritz charity event, Irene triumphs over her sister, and Godfrey is able to express his contempt for the oblivious crowd. In contrast to the dumpsite, the charity ballroom offers a conspicuous surplus of wealth and a disregard for the commodities, animals, and people dragged into the contest lines. It was Irene who was the "fish out of water" at the dumpsite, and it is now the impoverished Godfrey who is distinctly out of place. This discrepancy further broadens Irene's vision of things, and she hires Godfrey as a butler on the spot. The next day, Godfrey arrives at the Bullock mansion, where issues of privilege, extravagant wealth, and rude treatment of servants are on display. The cynical maid, Molly (the indispensable Jean Dixon), does her best to serve the household, remain employed in such a madhouse of eccentric demands and desires, while serving up sarcastic and ironic commentary. Indifference to the effects of the Depression by the privileged is carried over from the previous scenes; we learn from Molly that in the Bullock home, the firing of staff is a casual matter and happens frequently without just cause.

The casting of the wonderful, deep-voiced Eugene Palette as Mr. Bullock deliberately assigns intimations of working-class origins to his character, suggesting that his enormous riches are the result of hard work and qualities Depression audiences could admire. It's another story, however, for the other members of his family and their hangers-on, all of whom appear to be quite unjustly subsidized and rewarded for their activities and behavior. Further, we discover that they

are insulated from the usual consequences of misbehavior and infractions of the law. Depression audiences watching ***My Man Godfrey*** could enjoy the antics of the Bullocks while appreciating the social criticism of the wealthy elite.

Earlier, I made the claim that we are currently experiencing the consequences of decades of rising wealth disparity in America – approaching Depression-era levels. This income disparity or wealth inequity has undermined the middle class and channeled wealth instead to the richest individuals and corporations. I should pause here to cite a few facts to back this up. If you've been keeping current with this topic, you'll want to skip over this paragraph, as the statistics are distressing and demoralizing to review: "According to the C.I.A.'s own ranking of countries by income inequality, the United States is a more unequal society than either Tunisia or Egypt," where revolutions have recently sprouted. (Out of 140 countries, the United States is 40th, closer to the bottom of the C.I.A. list of relative equality.) And this shocker (confirmed by PolitiFact): "The 400 wealthiest Americans have a greater combined net worth than the bottom 150 million Americans" (Both from the New York Times, Oct. 16, 2011). Deeply troubling is this: "Earnings of male workers in the middle of the income ladder are lower today than they were almost 40 years ago" according to the recent US annual poverty and income report. In 2010 the median male worker earned about $1500 less in real dollars than the median male worker made in 1973! During this period, economic output *doubled*—meaning that median male workers became way more productive – but that income gain did not go to that highly productive middleclass employee (NPR, Sept. 17, 2011). Where did that that wealth go? "Over the last three decades, the wealthiest 1% of Americans more than doubled their share of national income, while the bottom 80 % saw their share shrink." (NPR, Jan. 14, 2012) . By 2007, the top 1% income share reached levels not seen since 1928, the year before the Crash of 1929 (New York Times, Oct. 9, 2011). None of this movement of wealth was accidental, but that's another topic. I compiled these stats and sources in 2012. The situation is worse now, as this Sept. 14, 2020 article in *Time Magazine* proves (with data from the RAND Corp.), entitled, "The Top 1% of Americans Have Taken $50 Trillion From the Bottom 90%—And That's Made the U.S. Less Secure," https://time.com/5888024/50-trillion-income-inequality-america/.

What does income disparity have to do with screwball comedy? A good deal. Most scholars of film history mark 1934 as the beginning of screwball comedy, the year of the screwball box office smash, ***It Happened One Night***. The term, by the way, comes from baseball: the *screwball* pitch. Similar to this pitcher's throw, screwball comedies take unexpected turns. They follow the structural pattern of romantic comedy, a pattern Hollywood borrowed from Shakespearian comedy, but moment to moment screwball comedies are unpredictable. Among the key features of screwball romantic comedy was the tendency to force characters who personified opposing values of rich and poor to occupy the same space and to fight it out. So it is that a privileged runaway heiress (Claudette Colbert) becomes briefly penniless and must share a bus ride and small motel rooms with a working-class grunt, a cynical unemployed journalist (Clark Gable), in ***It Happened One Night***. The gulf between how the rich and the working class see the world had always been present in America, but in the 1930s the Depression had sharpened the points of conflict and the division, and screwball comedy seized upon this conflict as suitable material for hilarity. (And we are all the richer for it.) The battle of the sexes was mixed in with the battle between the haves and the have nots, intensifying both struggles. So (as Andrew Bergman and others have pointed out), there is a lot of conflict, breakups, separations, and divorce in the screwball romantic comedies during the Depression, representing the larger social and economic divisions that were in need of healing.

The mending of divisions is crucial to comic endings as a strict rule. The conflicts in comedies must be resolved and the warring parties reconciled. Comic resolutions have always trafficked in surprise solutions, in magical transformations – yes, even in Shakespeare – and in characters who are remarkably changed, who become tolerant or wise, are finally enlightened and able to see another's point of view. And so screwball comedies, in the end, always found a way – however unlikely it may be – to reunite the quarreling couple, or to restore the marriage, and to banish the class divisions that were (and are) obstacles to everyone's happiness. ***My Man Godfrey***, having spotlighted the issue of Wall Street's collapse and capitalism's failure to provide for the economic well-being of the nation, must find a way to restore our faith in capitalism's ability to make things right again, to transform itself into a powerful engine of opportunity for all once more. It cannot be an economic system that creates vast wealth for a mere few, who then pass on their riches to undeserving progeny such as we see in the Bullock family, relegating everyone else to the category of forgotten men, women, and children. Hence, in ***My Man Godfrey***, we see Godfrey's magical transformation in the end from a displaced individual, defeated and powerless, to someone with entrepreneurial drive and know-how, able to transcend class barriers. But Godfrey is also someone who has a visionary scheme for his own success that is inclusive and unselfish. Godfrey's plan pulls forgotten men up with him.

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