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The Awful Truth

1 In a prologue, at the Gotham Athletic Club, Jerry Warriner (Cary Grant) is about to get a sunlamp treatment sufficient to make it appear that he has spent the last two weeks in Florida “even if it takes all afternoon.” He tells a passing acquaintance who is brandishing a squash racket, “What wives don’t know won’t hurt them.” And he adds, “And what you don’t know won’t hurt you.” He invites the acquaintance to come home with him that afternoon for protection, I mean for drinks.

2 Entering the house with several acquaintances, Jerry discovers that his wife Lucy is not at home. He invents the explanation that she is at her Aunt Patsy’s place in the country, an explanation which collapses when Aunt Patsy walks in looking for Lucy.

3 Lucy Warriner (Irene Dunne) enters, in evening dress, followed by Armand Duvalle, her singing teacher, with a story about chaperoning a dance and then on the road back having the car break down miles from nowhere, and spending the night at a most inconvenient inn. Jerry mockingly pretends to believe the story and is complimented by Armand for having “a continental mind.” The guests take the cue to leave; so, in a way, does Jerry, who says his faith is destroyed; Lucy says she knows what he means and tosses him an orange with “California” stamped on it that Jerry had sent to her as from Florida. She says he has returned to catch her in a truth, to which he responds by calling her a philosopher. He in turn philosophizes, in a speech which includes the lines “Marriage is based on faith. When that’s gone everything’s gone.” She asks if he really means that and upon his affirming it she telephones for a divorce.

4 Her lawyer, on the phone, repeatedly tells Lucy not to be hasty, that marriage is a beautiful thing. He is repeatedly interrupted by his wife, asking him why they have to be interrupted, whom he repeatedly invites, each time covering the phone, to shut her mouth.

5 In court to begin divorce proceedings, Mr. Smith (the couple's fox terrier) is tricked by Lucy into choosing to live with her. Jerry asks for visiting rights.

6 Aunt Patsy wants to get out of the apartment she and Lucy share and have some fun for a change. (Since they are dressed in evening gowns, we rather get the idea that this is not the first time they have found themselves all dressed up with no place to go.) Lucy objects that they haven't an escort. Aunt Patsy stalks out and comes back with their neighbor from across the hall, Dan Leeson (Ralph Bellamy), whom she has in effect rescued from going out alone. Dan declares that he's from Oklahoma, in oil; when Aunt Patsy draws the implication that he's marinated, he, somewhat to our surprise, gets the joke, even boisterously. Jerry takes this moment to appear for his visiting time with Mr. Smith, whom he accompanies at the piano. The others leave.

6a The next morning Dan's mother warns him in general about women and in particular about that kind of women.

6b Aunt Patsy warns Lucy against acting on the rebound, pointing out to her that her toast is burning.

6c 6a continued.

6d 6b continued.

7 In a nightclub Jerry's friend Dixie Belle sings and enacts "My Dreams Are Gone with the Wind." On each recurrence of the title line, air jets from the floor blow Dixie Belle's flowing skirt up higher and higher—she finally gives up trying to hold it down, or in other words, throws up her hands.

8 Just before that, Lucy and Dan had entered the club and taken a table. Jerry takes Dixie Belle over to introduce her; when she leaves for her act, Jerry invites himself to join Dan and Lucy. On meeting Dixie Belle, Lucy had sincerely complimented Jerry on finding himself a nice companion, evincing considerable surprise at his good taste. Now, after witnessing her act, Lucy seems uncertain about it.

9 When Jerry corrects Dan's impression that Lucy dislikes dancing, Dan, from whom we learn that he is a champion dancer, alertly draws her onto the floor. The music changes and Dan is moved to take over the floor with a display of his champion jitterbugging. Jerry so thoroughly enjoys Lucy's taste of country life that he tips the orchestra to repeat the same number. He pulls up a chair to the edge of the dance floor, sits legs crossed, arms draped before him carelessly, perfectly, fronting the dancers and the camera, looking directly at the world with as handsome a smile as Cary Grant has it in him to give, in as full

an emblem of the viewer viewed—the film turned explicitly to its audience, to ask who is scrutinizing whom—as I know in film. I think of it as a hieratic image of the human, the human transfigured on film. This man, in words of Emerson's, carries the holiday in his eye; he is fit to stand the gaze of millions. (What fits Cary Grant, or anyone, to stand this normal condition of a film star? It cannot be some independently definable property that differentiates them from each of those millions.) Call this the end of Act One.

10a Lucy and Dan at the piano in his apartment make a duet of "Home on the Range."

10b Jerry enters to discuss their business deal about a mine.

10c Dan's mother comes in with a piece of gossip about Lucy; Jerry sort of clears her name with a speech of mock gallantry that includes the line "Our marriage was one of those tragedies you read about in the newspapers." The mother shows she is still not satisfied, whereupon Lucy retreats to let her and her son sort the matter out between them.

11 Lucy returns to her apartment to find Jerry there, rewarding himself with a drink for having, he says, given her that swell reference; she haughtily refuses his offer of financial help, and laughs heartily as the piano top falls on his hand. As they walk toward the door for Jerry to leave, Dan knocks. Lucy opens the door, which serves to conceal Jerry from Dan, who apologizes for his mother's suspicions and insists on reading Lucy a poem of love he has written for her. As he embarks on it, Jerry, from behind the door, prods Lucy to laughter with surreptitious pencil jabs in her ribs. The phone rings, on the other side of Jerry. Lucy answers; we are shown by an insert that it is Armand; Lucy asks whoever it is to wait and puts down the phone; as she crosses back past Jerry to complete her exchange with Dan, behind her back Jerry picks up the phone and learns who it is that Lucy has concealed on the other end. Lucy gets rid of Dan by giving him a kiss; he departs noisily. Lucy makes an appointment into the waiting phone, handed to her by Jerry, for three o'clock the next afternoon, explaining to Jerry after she hangs up that it was her masseuse. Jerry finally leaves, saying he's just seen a three-ring circus.

12 At three o'clock, evidently the next afternoon, Jerry forces his way into Armand's apartment only to embarrass himself on discovering Lucy in the middle of a salon song performed for a small attentive audience, Armand accompanying her at the piano.

13 The next day in her apartment, Lucy, having faced her unfaded love for

crazy Jerry, has written a letter calling it off with Dan. She places the letter on her mantel and asks Aunt Patsy to deliver it for her.

14 The farce now blossoms. Each party shows up to apologize to Lucy. Mr. Smith precipitates the tangling as he fetches Armand's hat for Jerry, whom it doesn't fit, similar as it is, and try as he will. The two men find themselves alone together in Lucy's bedroom, Armand to have avoided Jerry, Jerry to have avoided Dan and his mother, who have appeared from across the hall. From the bedroom the two men dash across the living room past the assembled others and out the door. Dan says, a moroser if wiser man, "I've learned a lot about women from you, Lucy: I've learned that a man's best friend is his mother." As he and his best friend begin their exit, Aunt Patsy takes Lucy's letter from the mantel and hands it to him: "Here's your diploma." Call this the end of Act Two.

15a Mr. Smith barks at the society page of the newspaper Lucy is reading; it says that Jerry and Barbara Vance are to be married as soon as his divorce is final, which incidentally is today.

15b The newspaper comes alive in a montage of Jerry and Barbara's whirlwind romance, which mostly consists of their attending or participating in society sports events; the sequence reads like the society segment of, say, a *Movietone News*.

16 Lucy appears at Jerry's apartment to say goodbye on the eve of their final divorce decree. She recites a poem Jerry wrote for her early in their relationship. She introduces it by saying, "This will hand you a laugh," but neither of them is tickled in the ribs. They sample some champagne that Jerry has ready in an ice bucket, as if he was expecting this visit. It turns out that the life has gone out of the champagne; evidently they are unable to celebrate either divorce or marriage. To account for Lucy's presence when she answers a phone call from Barbara Vance, Jerry invents the fable that his sister is visiting from Europe, then after a pause explains that she can't accompany him to the Vance household that evening because she's busy and anyway she is returning to Europe almost immediately. Lucy remarks that he's slipping.

17 That night, at the Vance establishment, Lucy, in a racy costume, interrupts a flagging family occasion with an indecorous display as Jerry's low-down sister. She claims to be a nightclub performer and gives them a modified version of Dixie Belle's "Gone with the Wind" routine. ("There's a wind effect right here but you will just have to use

your imagination.”) Jerry joins her on her exit from the song and dance.

18 They drive to their conclusion in Connecticut.

The path to the green world is portrayed here in more detail than in any member of the genre (except *Bringing Up Baby*), and the effect is to suggest, something said but not shown in *The Lady Eve*, that there is no clear way to get there, no obvious predictable path and no obvious vehicle; it is, in short, a mythical locale. On leaving the Vance mansion, the pair enter an open car whose radio squawks intolerably. Lucy, pretending to be drunk (she is obviously in a heightened state of mind), causes the radio's behavior, as if it speaks her mind. Then on a darkened, unmarked road, two motorcycle policemen stop the fleeing pair for speeding. As Jerry is talking with the officers, Lucy releases the hand brake of the car, sending it down a small embankment to slam against a tree. She asks the officers to give them rides on their motorcycles to her aunt's place, only fifteen miles from where they are stopped, where they can properly be identified. They behave like children, riding on the handlebars of the motorcycles, making rude noises, she fairly manic, he fully solemn. On arriving at the country house and being identified, Lucy treats the policemen as if they were valued servants. Lucy evinces blank surprise when the husband of the couple who take care of the house says Aunt Patsy is not there, and then, claiming to be exhausted, bounds up a flight of stairs—all of which Jerry recognizes as some kind of continuation of the charade she has been putting on as his sister and as Dixie Belle.

They occupy adjoining bedrooms, as it were playing dress-up in clothes borrowed from the elderly housekeepers, he in a nightshirt, she in a nightgown patently too large for her. How they overcome the difficulties of getting the closed door between them to open, and to stay closed at the right time, is a saga in itself. Lucy says they have a problem. We could call it a problem in finding an escape from their having backed their way toward an edge of divorce which neither wants—an escape, or escapade, having to do with wind effects, with a cat that as it were protects Lucy from Jerry, to Lucy's chagrin, and with a cascade of philosophy falling from each of them. Along the way she says: “Things are just the same as they always were, only you're just the same, too, so I guess things will never be the same again.” And he: “Things are different, except in a different way. You're still the same, only I've

been a fool. Well, I'm not now. So, as long as I'm different, don't you think things could be the same again? Only a little different."

A passage from Plato's late dialogue *Parmenides* bears a clear and comic resemblance to this exchange:

Parmenides: Then, that which becomes older than itself, also becomes at the same time younger than itself, if it is to have something to become older than.

Aristotles: What do you mean?

Parmenides: I mean this.—A thing does not need to become different from another thing which is already different; it *is* different, and if its different has become, it has become different; if its different will be, it will be different; but of that which is becoming different, there cannot have been, or be about to be, or yet be, a different—the only different possible is one which is becoming.

Aristotles: That is inevitable.

The conjunction reveals, or affirms, a double revelation: first, that the thoughts of one of the most complex pieces of philosophy ever composed are recognizably recapturable in contemporary conversation, or in the representation of such conversation by a clever writer who may or may not have studied Plato in college; second, that there is something in the sublimest philosophy that can strike one as comic.

The pair's exchanges lead, through further intricacies, to their representation by apparently miniature Swiss figurines coming separately out of a Swiss cuckoo clock at the stroke of midnight and disappearing together back into the clock. An obvious implication is that, while at midnight their divorce decree becomes final, they are allegorized as doing then the precise thing that automatically voids the decree, namely "cohabiting." So are they (re)married or not? Since the clock takes the form of a chalet, a dwelling of the sort they are literally inhabiting, their reentry into it suggests that they are reconceiving their sense of past, present, and future, or say their relation to time, to what it means to inhabit its repetitions together.

Perhaps the deepest contribution of this film to the psychological exploration of the genre of remarriage comedy is its emphasis on the requirement of the genre that the pair have known each other forever, hence that they are, or have been, something like brother and sister—the original inti-

macy which must be broken if a different intimacy, that of strangers, or of the exogamous (ultimately, the difficult recognition of the separation, the otherness, of others), is to be achieved. That this should be combined with registering Lucy's difference from herself, or her double nature as socially refined and as erotically risky, each epitomized in the delivery of a different song, and each complexly, expertly executed by Irene Dunne, amounts to several strokes of cinematic and narrative brilliance. And these are joined in by the strong, but apparently backward, or say original, ways Cary Grant reacts to each version of Irene Dunne—when she is refined, by falling all over himself; when she is raucous, by managing to show his appreciation of her spiritual daring by visibly controlling his admiration of her and by displaying his connection with her to the assembled company in forming a walk-off with her to end her Dixie Belle impersonation.

I mention here the fatal contrast to Jerry's appreciation of Lucy's voice when Dan asks her, after their duet on "Home on the Range," whether she, who accompanies them on the piano, has ever had any lessons. The question of voice and its non-negotiable demand for recognition is here made explicit, yet all but disguised by the drift of the narrative. In the sequence preceding the climactic sister act at the Vance household, Lucy appears at Jerry's bachelor apartment to mark the day that is to achieve their divorce. As a toast of farewell, after Jerry pours the champagne, she says, "I remember the first drink we ever had. In your best manner you offered a toast. You said—this will hand you a laugh: 'Lend an ear, I implore you. This comes from the heart; I'll always adore you. Until death do us part.'" (Another fatal comparison with Dan's poetic effort to her a few sequences earlier.) Before they can consult the implications of their both being moved, and as if to distract them from consulting themselves, Barbara Vance phones, discovering that Jerry has questionable company. We accordingly never have time to consider the peculiarity of the phrase "Lend an ear." It asks, of course, for another's attention to your voice. But it could also be taken to ask for help with your own ear, to confess a sense of inadequacy in your isolated capacity to respond, a desire and willingness for reciprocation. (Precisely a recognition of limitation, call it finitude, that Dan Leeson, in his duet with Lucy, had shown himself incapable of.) The ensuing routine in the bosom of the Vance family can then be understood as Lucy's responding to Jerry's old desire for her attention and for her provision of instruction in his capacity for hearing.

Go back for a moment to the mysterious road leading to their concluding

night in the country, and their mishap with the means of transportation. There is a realization here of the earlier instance of a story of late-night mishap on an isolated country road, as Lucy and Armand enter the house to encounter the just-returned Jerry and his acquaintances. There Jerry had scorned the story, and Lucy had countered with scorn, precipitating an impasse of mutual credibility that precipitated the drastic measure of, let's call it, the standing threat or option of divorce. On his own adventure with Lucy on a country road, Jerry has the chance to recognize the intuitive impossibility that the fun Lucy is having with him could resemble any fun she might have found during her night with Armand.

But then why doesn't he see this in his initial encounter with this foolishly simple European and his continental mind? We have to count it to Jerry's credit that he trusts Lucy's seriousness sufficiently to wonder what this apparently uncompetitive manikin can provide for her that is beyond his American capacities. And indeed his incapacity again proves to concern his failure (even his) to have recognized the range of Lucy's voice, the single attribute Armand is hired by her to concern himself with. Jerry is, as the genre of remarriage characteristically shows the spiritually ambitious man to be, fated to make a further, explicit, expiatory, fool of himself.

Lucy's voice teacher's name is, as revealed by a close-up of the card on his apartment door the afternoon Jerry invades what proves to be a musicale, "Armand Duvalle." This is, deliberately or not, a misspelling of the Armand Duval who is the love interest in Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias* and of the George Cukor film of that play entitled *Camille*, arguably Garbo's greatest role, with Robert Taylor as Armand. (Here are tragedies of the sort one might read of in the newspapers.) Since *Camille* was made several years after *The Awful Truth*, and since, in Verdi and Piave's *La Traviata*, another adaptation of the Dumas play, the names of the characters are changed to characteristically Italian names, our Lucy's Armand must come directly from Dumas. What might the point be? I have to think that the director of *The Awful Truth*, Leo McCarey (and his scriptwriter, Vina Delmar), are less making a little easy fun of European pretension (just a little fun, since Lucy's salon song carries weight in the narrative and is sung by her in French), than balancing a perception of an American overvaluation of European cultivation with an American undervaluation of cultivation (as represented in Dan's bragging about having had no voice lessons): Dan and Armand seem mild caricatures of each of their nationalities as seen by the other's. The

sophistication of Lucy's and Jerry's sensibilities is accordingly confirmed in this regard by their being free of such prejudices.

Perhaps more directly, the name emphasizes that this Armand cannot possibly be taken as the erotic threat to an established relationship that Dumas's Armand patently and fatally is, hence that the obstacle to the continuation of Lucy's and Jerry's marriage is not external, but lies within each of them.

This is another description of what I called a moment ago their crisis, or impasse, of mutual credibility. It would indicate why the moral perplexities in wanting a mysterious, perhaps uneventful, two weeks of unmonitored freedom; or of arranging a recital as an assignation; or of feeling unlistened to, or of being unspoken to, or unspoken for—why these perplexities are not assessable by utilitarian calculation or by Kantian law. There is not some action for either of them to take whose pros and cons or whose universalizability requires addressing, like offering better gifts of fruit or flowers, or vowing never to spend another night out of the house, come what may.

There is an unspoken attunement of moral perception that conditions, and calls upon, our ability to make ourselves intelligible to each other. The sense of attunement lost, in an encounter in which only through the other do you reach to your attunement with yourself, is a way of framing the perfectionist moment. I find myself thinking, perhaps extravagantly, of Cathy's saying, in *Wuthering Heights*, "Heathcliff is more myself than I am"; or, in *Great Expectations*, of Pip's saying to Stella, "You have become part of my character." Perhaps extravagantly, but I cannot think irrelevantly. While these may not express common intensities of moral dilemmas, both are expressions of a recognition of moral intimacy, of a sense of doing mortal harm and being threatened with irreparable harm, unsensed in its stakes by the rest of the world. Can I trust the perception of one who does not respect the anguish in these outcries? But how is respect shown here? By moral confrontation? Who has the standing for this? Then by recognizing that whatever course is to be taken, suffering is to be clarified and acknowledged? It is an awful, an awesome truth that the acknowledgment of the otherness of others, of ineluctable separation, is the condition of human happiness. Indifference is the denial of this condition.

What I called the inner obstacles sheltered by Lucy and by Jerry are in a sense revealed by what overcomes the obstacles—in Jerry's case, as said, by his demonstration of being knocked out, or brought to his senses, by each of

Lucy's opposite songs, in Lucy's case by her demonstration of her Dixie Belle earthiness as bound up with the even more dangerous closeness between her and Jerry in her sisterly intimacy with him, no less a puzzle to her, surely, than to him.

Shall we make a stab, in this context of Armand's ambiguous presence, at interpreting what Lucy means by saying that Jerry, in arriving home before her entrance with Armand, has caught her in a truth, which leads Jerry to accuse her of being a philosopher and to agree to a divorce? Evidently being caught marks the awfulness of this truth. Well, what is true about being discovered in company with Armand, which seems to be Lucy's meaning in saying she was caught? Given what we have been saying, we could answer that it is her realization that love catches you, that no matter what accidents befall you or who you happen to bring home with you, you love where you love. Another awful truth of finitude is that, unlike gods, we mortals are not generally reliable mind readers, so that love between mortals, to be known, must be spoken. This requirement is emphasized in the genre of remarriage comedy by the man's having to claim his right to speak of love to the woman, to ask for reciprocation; as it were, to go first. Perhaps it was to remind Jerry of this requirement that Lucy brought Armand home with her. (And perhaps this is how Hildy and Walter understand his apparent inconsiderateness in going through doors and gates and down stairs—barriers of any kind—ahead of her.)

Another drawback of mortality, of human speech and thought, is that going through doors, or getting them open, is not as straightforward as one would like to imagine. It can demand, and inspire, poetry; and require the disguise, or revelation, of exotic songs and dances; and the taste of flat champagne; and singing a duet with a terrier; and wearing an ill-fitting flannel nightshirt; and inviting the aid of a high wind. (Is improvisation a virtue?) And after that it still can await a flurry of philosophy to try to get one's own mind and its body together and in the same direction, let alone in concord with another's mind and body. The wonder is that the craving for clarity is available to two in conversation when it is denied to either alone.

A concluding thought. Remarriage comedies are a specific, limited genre, habitually included in hasty journalistic reports of films within the massive (differently conceived) genre familiarly known as "screwball comedy." Sometimes I try to reconcile myself to this confusing inclusion. But some-

times I have objected to the indiscriminateness of this idea, which is no more illuminating than the title “women’s film.” I agree that it is no less illuminating. But there is a moment in *The Awful Truth* which I take to be a declaration that this film is not to be classed with screwball comedies. It occurs in the sequence following the two-men-in-a-bedroom farce, when Lucy reads in the newspaper about Jerry’s engagement to Barbara Vance, whom Aunt Patsy describes as a “madcap heiress,” namely the character supposed to be the distinguishing feature of screwball comedy. (This fits very well an interesting film such as *My Man Godfrey* with William Powell and the great Carole Lombard, which no one would suppose to be a remarriage comedy.) I take Aunt Patsy’s identification as suggesting that a film featuring Jerry’s romance with Barbara Vance might constitute a screwball comedy (except that Barbara is not witty), thus implying that the film before us not one.