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LADY LARKSPUR

By MEREDITH NICOLSON



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CHAPTER I.

The "Troops"

"It was hard luck," said Searles, "that I should spend a year writing a play for a woman only to find that she had vanished—jumped off the earth into nowhere. This was my highest flight, Singleton, the best writing I ever did, and after the vast pains I took with the thing, the only woman I ever saw who could possibly act it is unavailable; worse than that, absolutely undiscoversable! Nobody knows I have this script; I've kept quiet about it simply because I'm not going to be forced into accepting a star I don't want. I have a feeling about this play that I never had about my other things. The public has been so kind to my small offerings that I'm trying to lead 'em on to the best I can do; something a little finer and more imaginative, with a touch of poetry, if you please. And now—"

He glared at me as though I were responsible for his troubles. As he knew I had been flying in the French aviation corps for two years and had just been invalided home, I didn't think it necessary to establish an alibi. Fate had been kind to Dick Searles. In college he had written a play or two that demonstrated his talent, and after a rigid apprenticeship as scene-shifter and assistant producer he had made a killing with "Let George Do It," a farce that earned enough to put him at ease and make possible an upward step into straight comedy. Even as we talked a capacity house was laughing at his skit, "Who Killed Cock Robin?" just around the corner from his lodgings. So his story was not the invention of a rejected playwright to cover the non-appearance of a play which nobody would produce.

"Isn't it always a mistake to write a play for a particular star?" I suggested. "Seems to me I've read somewhere that that is among the besetting sins of you playwrights."

"Old stuff, my boy; but this isn't one of those cases. The person I had in mind for this play wasn't a star, but a beginner, quite unknown. It was when I was in London putting on 'Fairy Gold' that I saw her; she had a small part in a pantomime, and pantomime is the severest test of an actor's powers, you know. A little later she appeared in 'Honorable Women,' a capital play that died early, but there again I felt her peculiar charm—it was just that. She was exquisite! No one ever captured my imagination as she did. I watched her night after night. I was afraid that when I heard her voice it would break the spell, and I actually shook like a man with an ague when she tripped out on the stage as the ingenue in 'Honorable Women.' And her laughter! You know how hollow the usual stage mirth is, but that girl's laugh had the joy of the lark ascending!"

"By Jove!" I ejaculated, "there's more here than appears. You're in love with the girl!"

"Rubbish," he cried impatiently. "You'll think I'm talking rot, but this girl was the visualization of a character I had dreamed of and groped after for years. That's all; but it's a whole lot, I can tell you!"

"Let us be practical for a moment, Searles," I urged. "Emperors, presidents, and popular murderers are not more conspicuous than the people of the stage. No girl talented enough to get two engagements, even for small parts, in a first-class London theater could vanish. With your acquaintance in the profession you'd be able to trace her anywhere on earth. By the way, what did the paragon call herself?"

"Violet Dewing was her stage name and the only name the managers knew her by. I assumed that, of course, all I had to do was to finish my play and then have Dalton, who represents me over there, make an appointment to read it to her; but Dalton worked for three months trying to find her, without success. I wasn't the only person who was interested in her. Dalton said that half a dozen managers had their eye on her, but after 'Honorable Women' closed she stepped into the void. I knew what you're thinking—that the other members of

the two companies she appeared with must have had some inkling of her identity, but I tell you Dalton and I exhausted the possibilities. It was by accident that she got her chance in the pantomime—some one wouldn't do at the last minute, and they gave Miss Dewing a trial. She was well liked by her associates in spite of the fact that she was a bit offish and vanished from their world the minute the curtain fell."

"A clever governess out of a job, satisfying a craving for excitement and playing the mysterious role as a part of the adventure. Am I to assume that you've burned your play and that the incident is closed?"

"Oh, I didn't burn it; I have a copy locked in a safety vault, and Dalton left one heavily sealed at a small exclusive London hotel where, he found after much difficulty, the girl had lodged during her two engagements."

"You're morbid," I said. "Show me her photograph."

He laughed ironically. "Never a chance, Singleton! You haven't yet got the idea that this young woman is out of the ordinary. She refused to be photographed—wrote it into her two contracts that this was not to be asked, and I never saw her off the stage, and I can't give you a description of her that would be of the slightest assistance to the keenest detective alive. In that pantomime she was a frolle, the clown's daughter, and, although nobody saw it, she was the whole piece, the elusive sprite that could evoke laughter and tears by a gesture, a lifting of the brows, a grimace. By utterly different methods in 'Honorable Women' she proved her wide range of appeal. Hers was the one true characterization in the piece. When Terry was in her prime you remember how we used to say 'that only one bird sang like that, and from paradise it flew? Well, this bird sings on the same branch! Her voice was her charm made audible!"

"Rave some more!" I pleaded. "You never talked better in your life." "Don't be an ass," he said sourly. "Let's forget her and take a squint at your affairs. Just what do you mean to do with yourself?" "My shoulder still creaks a little, and the doctors advise me to sit around for a while. They offered me some jobs in Washington, but desk work and inspection duty are too tame after a couple of years spent in star clubbing. I'm going up to Barton-on-the-Sound and I'll camp in the garage on my uncle's place."

"Your uncle played you a nasty trick," interrupted Searles; "getting married and then adding to the crime by dying. You couldn't beat that for general spitefulness."

"Do you remember the immortal lines:

"Oh, skip your dear uncle!
The Bellman exclaimed
As he angrily tinkled his bell!"

"Oh, I'm not knocking the dead!" he protested. "Mr. Bashford always struck me as a pretty decent, square sort of chap, and not at all the familiar grouchy uncle of fiction and the drama. I made notes on him from time to time with a view to building a play around him—the perfect uncle, unobtrusive, never blustering at his nephew; translating the avuncular relationship into something remote and chaste like a distant view of Mount Washington in winter. It was just like him to retire from business on his sixtieth birthday and depart for the Orient, there to commit the shameless indiscretion of matrimony."

"Like him! It was the greatest shock of my life. To the best of my knowledge he never knew any women except the widow of his partner in the importing house. She was about eighty and perfectly safe. He spent twenty years in the Tyngbam, the dullest and most respectable hotel in the world, and his chief recreation was a leisurely walk in the park before going to bed. You could set your clock by him. Pretty thin pickling to a dramatist, I should think. He used to take me to the theater regularly every other Thursday—it was a date—and his favorite entertainment was vaudeville, with black-face embellishment preferred. But in

his shy fashion he was kind and generous and mighty good to me."

"If you hadn't gone to war, but had kept right at his elbow, the marriage might have been averted," suggested Searles. "He did leave you something, didn't he?"

"Fifty thousand cash and the right to use the garage at the Barton farm. Calling it a farm is a joke; it's rocks mostly. He bought the house to have a place to store his prints and Jap ceramics. He hated motoring except in taxis up and down town, and when I urged him to set up a machine, he told me to go ahead and buy one and build the garage. Told me I'd better fix up the studio in the garage and have it as a place to work in. His will provides that I may lodge in the garage for life."

"The estate footed a million, as I remember, so I can't praise his generosity. But the widow, your unknown auntie, the body-snatcher who annexed the old boy—what of her?"

"I've asked the trust company people whether she's in sight anywhere, and they assure me that she is not on these shores. Torrence, the third vice president—you know Torry; he was in the class ahead of us at college, the man who never smiles—Torry said she acknowledged the last remittance three months ago from Bangkok—wherever that is. I suppose the old girl's resumed her tour of the world looking for another retired merchant to add to her list."

"Very likely. To what nation, tribe, or human group does this pred-

atory person belong?"

"I'll tell you all I know. Just as I was sailing from France I got a letter from Uncle Bash stating in a most businesslike fashion that he was about to be married to a lady he had met on the trip out to Japan. The dire event was to occur at the American embassy the following day. From which I judged that my presence at the ceremony was neither expected nor desired. Oddly enough, months afterward, I picked up an English paper in a French inn that contained an announcement of the marriage in the usual advertisement form. The lady was succinctly described as Mrs. Alice Wellington Cornford, widow of the late Archibald Reynolds Cornford, Pepperharrow road, Hants. All Torrence knows of the subsequent proceedings is what he got in official reports of Uncle Bash's death from the consul-general at Tokyo. Whether the widow expects to come to America ultimately or will keep moving through the Orient marrying husbands and burying them is a dark mystery. If she should turn up, the house at Barton is hers, of course, but with her roving disposition I fancy my aunt Alice wouldn't like the place. The Jap stuff is worth a bit of money, and if the lady is keen for such things and not a mere adventuress she may take it into her head one of these days to come over and inspect the loot."

"I can see the vampire," said

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Cash Chasers

On a recent trip North a waist manufacturer offered to close out a lot of waists at a price. We secured all he had and they are unquestionably the greatest bargains we have seen for many seasons. They embrace fancy White Lawns and Crepe-de-Chines. Move quickly if you are after bargains.

Just opened Taffeta and Messaline Silks in new fall shades and many lines of other fabrics.

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Meeting You Half Way

WHOLESALE PRICES in staple dry goods have shown reductions in the past few weeks, and many dealers in these goods are passing on the reductions to their customers. This is as it should be, and we are doing the same. But in the more desirable merchandise, in which we specialize, reductions have not been so marked and goods still remain at the high level. Yet, to cope with the present situation and meet our customers half way, we have marked our goods very low, and are selling many lines at less prices than the same goods can be bought for today. We invite a close inspection of our stock and you will find that our prices compare favorably with those of other stores anywhere carrying similar lines. Reductions which we have made represent a saving of from 20 to 25 per cent off the present market prices. We believe these reductions will go far in reducing the cost of living this year.

Switzer Company
Laurens, South Carolina