

# LADY LARKSPUR

BY

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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# **LADY LARKSPUR**

# 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 undiscoverable! 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. That girl was its inspiration. 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 rose from his broad work-table (he scorned the familiar type of desk) and 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. But I hastened to express my sympathy for his predicament. 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 'Honourable Women,' a capital play that died early, but there again I felt her peculiar charm—it was just that. Her part was a minor one, but she wore it as she might wear a glove; 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 ingénue in 'Honourable 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!"

"Of course, you established lines of communication and gave her a hint that you meant to write a play for her?"

"Certainly not! That would have spoiled the whole thing. It was her art, not the woman, that interested me. I didn't want to take the chance of being disillusioned. I have been through that experience, and I prefer not to meet the people who act in my pieces. I want their art, not their views on human destiny or the best place to get lobster à la Newburg."

"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 theatre 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. She clearly wasn't the product of the provincial theatres—hadn't any of the marks. I wasn't the

only person who was interested in her. Dalton said half a dozen managers had their eye on her, but after 'Honourable Women' closed she stepped into the void. I know 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 rôle as 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. 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. As I've tried to convey to your practical mind, it's the spirit of the girl—the spirit of comedy, that I've



dramatized—not a girl you take out to supper only to find that she has no wit, no charm, no anything but a monstrous appetite for indigestible food and a silly ambition to play rôles the gods never intended her to play. In that pantomime she was a frolic, the clown's daughter, and, though 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 'Honourable Women' she proved her wide range of appeal. The chap who produced 'Honourable Women' told me that after the first rehearsal Bayley, the author, begged him for God's sake to let the girl do it her own way, so as not to lose her freshness and spontaneity. 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! She's the most natural being I ever saw on the stage, and she can *look* more comedy than anybody else I ever saw act!"

"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 climbing. The

doctors tell me to cultivate repose for a few months and maybe they'll pass me into our flying corps, but they don't promise anything. I'm going up to Barton-on-the-Sound and I'll camp in the garage on my uncle's place. You remember that I built the thing myself, and the quarters are good enough for a busted veteran."

"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 tingled 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. As I recall, there were only two great passions in your uncle's life—Japanese art and green-turtle soup. 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. He used to dine with her now and then, and I caught him once sending her flowers at Easter—probably an annual stunt. She was about eighty and perfectly safe. He spent twenty years in the Tyringham, 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 picking for a dramatist, I should think. He used to take me to the theatre regularly every other Thursday—it was a date—and his favorite entertainment was vaudeville with black-face embellishment preferred. You should add that to Japanese pottery and potage à la tortue. He joined the yacht club just because the green turtle at that joint is the best in New York. Yachts! He never sailed in anything but the biggest steamers, and got no fun out of that. I crossed with him twice, and he never left his bunk. 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 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. He rather sniffed at the writing I do, but told me I'd better fix up a 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 seemed anxious to learn about her from me, which is certainly droll. He said she acknowledged her last remittance three months ago from Bangkok—wherever that is. Torry couldn't see that Bangkok is so absurdly remote that the idea of a widow's strolling off there is funny. 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 predatory person belong?"

"I'll tell you all I know. Just as I was sailing for France I got a letter from Uncle Bash stating in the most businesslike fashion that he was about to be married to a lady he had met on his 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. He was buried over there and the life-insurance companies were rather fussy about the legal proof, Torry says. 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 Searles musingly, "landing at the Grand Central with enough hand-luggage to fill a freight-car; a big, raw-boned creature, with a horse face and a horrible mess as to clothes. You will be there to meet her, deferential, anxious to please. You will pilot her up the coast to Barton, tip the servants heavily to keep them from murdering her, and twiddle your thumbs in your garage as you await her further pleasure. By the way, are those ancient freaks still on the place—those broken-down hotel employees who were your uncle's sole experiment in philanthropy?"

"Torrence assures me that they are all very much there."

Searles yielded himself to laughter. "An Englishwoman with lofty ideas of domestic service would certainly enjoy a romp with that crew. I supposed the trust company had brushed them into the Sound before this."

"Oh, they are in the same class with me," I explained. "The place can't be sold till I die, and while I live they're to be harbored—about thirty of them—clothed and victualled."

"I think there's a farce in the idea, and I may try it one of these days," he said, scribbling in his note-book. "A refuge for broken-down chambermaids, venerable bell-hops grown gray in the service, and the head waiter who amassed a fortune in tips and then toyed with the market once too often and lost his ill-gotten gains. What was the head waiter's name who presided with so much stateliness in the dining-room of the Tyringham? I mean the white-haired chap who was so particular about the foot-cushions for the nice old ladies in caps and lavender ribbons and India shawls—I think I can work him in somewhere."

"That's Antoine, who married the assistant housekeeper at the Tyringham. He's the butler and has charge of the place—a sort of commander-in-chief of the outfit. When I get settled I'll ask you up and you can study the bunch at leisure."

"Splendid! Reserve one room for me on the sunny side of the garage and I'll be up in a couple of weeks. I'm going to Ohio to-morrow for a family reunion and a look at the loved spots my infancy knew."

"You're lucky to have home-folks even in Ohio," I remarked enviously.

"Well, there's always your distant auntie, cruising the seven seas in pursuit of husbands. Nobody with an aunt to his credit can pretend to be alone in the world. There *is*

something about an aunt, Singleton! Aunts must rank just a little below mothers in the heavenly kingdom. When I was a boy out in Ohio there were two great occasions every year in my life—one when I went to visit a grand old aunt I had in the country, the other when she visited us, arriving with a wagon-load of jam, jelly, salt-rising bread, pound-cake, and other unpurchasable manna."

"Stop! or I'll call the food censor," I pleaded, picking up my hat. "Send me your copy of 'Lady Geranium,' and I'll tell you whether it's a classic or not."

"Lady Larkspur," he corrected with a shudder. "You shall have it by trusted messenger to-morrow."

I wired Antoine that I would reach Barton-on-the-Sound the following day. This was September, 1917. The former servants of the Tyringham were established on the place by my uncle the year before he dropped business cares and departed for the Japan of his dreams, and as I had been often at the hotel where he spent so many of the years of his life, I knew most of the old retainers. They were deeply appreciative of his kindness, and when I had gone to the farm for an uninterrupted month in finishing some piece of writing they had shown me the greatest consideration.

As the train rolled along the familiar shore toward Barton I shook off the depression occasioned by my enforced retirement from the great struggle overseas. I had done under the French flag all that it was possible for me to do; and there was some consolation in the fact that by reason of my two years on the battle-line I was just so much ahead of

the friends I met in New York who were answering the call to the colors and had their experience of war all before them. The tranquil life that had been recommended by the doctors was not only possible at Barton, but it was the only life that could be lived there. Plenty of exercise in the open and regular habits would, I had been assured, set me up again, and my leisure I meant to employ in beginning a novel that had been teasing me ever since I sailed for home.

Of my uncle Bash I had only the happiest and most grateful memories. Quite naturally it had occurred to me at times, and my friends had encouraged the idea, that my uncle would die some day and leave me his money. There was no particular reason why he should do so, as he had never manifested any unusual affection for me and I had certainly never done anything for him.

Antoine was at the Barton station with the touring-car Uncle Bash had bought to establish communication with the village. Flynn, the big Irishman who had been the doorman at the Tyringham for years and retired because of rheumatism acquired from long exposure to the elements at the hostelry's portals, was at the wheel.

Antoine greeted me with that air of lofty condescension tempered with a sincere kindness that had made him a prince among head waiters. As I shook hands with him his lips quivered and tears came to his eyes. Flynn, standing beside the car, saluted with a welcoming grin.

"Very glad to see you, sorr. The trunk came this mornin' all right, sorr, and we put it in your room."



I bade Antoine join me in the back seat that he might the more easily bring me up to date as to affairs on the estate.

"It must be a little slow up here after the years you lived in town," I suggested, "but of course you're all old friends."

"Well, yes; all friends," he acquiesced, but with so little enthusiasm that I glanced at him quickly. He pretended to be absorbed in the flying landscape at the moment. Flynn, I noticed, was giving ear to our conversation from the wheel.

"It was sad, very sad, Mr. Bashford passing away so far from home, sir. It was a great shock. And he had looked forward for years to a quiet life abroad. It must have been ten years ago he first mentioned his hope of retiring to Japan."

Uncle Bash had given me no such forecast of his intentions, and I felt humble before this proof of Antoine's greater intimacy. Once at the beginning of our acquaintance, when I had complimented Antoine on his English, he explained that he was born in England of French parents. His father had been chef and his mother housekeeper for an American banker who lived for many years in London. Antoine's speech was that of a well-trained English upper servant, and I imagined that in his youth he had taken some English butler as his model. He used to pretend that he knew French very imperfectly, and I was surprised when he now addressed me quite fluently in that language.

"You have been with the armies of dear France," he remarked. "The war is very dreadful. My parents were of

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