

LADY LARKSPUR

By MEREDITH NICOLSON



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AUNT ALICE.

Synopsis—Richard Searles, successful American playwright, confides to his friend, Bob Singleton, the fact that, inspired by the genius of a young actress whom he had seen in London, he has written a play, "Lady Larkspur," solely with the thought that she should interpret the leading character. This girl, Violet Dewing, has disappeared. Singleton, an aviator, has just returned (invalided) from France. His uncle, Raymond Bashford, a wealthy man, had contracted a marriage a short time before his death, while on a visit to Japan. He left Singleton a comparatively small amount of money and the privilege of residence in the "garage" of his summer home, a New York hotel, where Bashford made his home. Singleton goes to Barton, taking with him the manuscript of "Lady Larkspur." There he finds the household strangely upset, some of its members being suspected by their comrades of pro-Germanism. Antoine, head of the establishment, informs him that he has been perplexed by the somewhat mysterious visits of a stranger, apparently a foreigner, seeking Mrs. Bashford. Antoine has formed the male members of the household into a guard for protection. Torrence, Bashford's lawyer, informs Singleton that Mrs. Bashford is in America and may be expected at Barton at any time. Singleton reads Searles' play and thinks highly of it.

CHAPTER II.

The Amazing Widow.

As soon as Torrence left I returned to the garage, feeling that with Mrs. Bashford on American soil my use of the residence even as a loafing place was unbecoming. Mrs. Bashford was not only in America, but with a motor at her command she might reach Barton at any hour. And the vigorous, dominating woman who had captured my uncle Bashford, buried him in a far country, and then effected a hop, skip, and jump from Bangkok to Seattle, was likely to be a prodigious spender of gasoline. Her propensity for traveling encouraged the hope that she would quickly weary of Barton and pine for lands where the elephant and jirrickisha flourish.

I had brought with me the manuscript of Searles' play, and I fell upon it frantically and began reading the first act. The dialogue moved briskly, and I read on as though enfolded in the air of a crisp spring morning. My grouch over the upsetting of my plans yielded under the spell of his humor. "Lady Larkspur" was the name assumed by the daughter of a reclusive naturalist in the valley of Virginia. She had known no life but that of the open country, where she ran wild all summer, riding her father in collecting plants and butterflies. He had educated the girl in such a manner that only the cheer and joy of life were known to her. Hatred mankind, he had encouraged her in nature-worship. She knew no literature except the classics; all history, even the history of the storied valley in which she lived, was a sealed book to her.

The girl's curiosity is roused by the sudden appearance of strangers from the unknown world beyond, whom she mystifies by her quaint old-worldishness. Searles had taken an old theme and given a novel twist to it. The solution of the mystery of the father's exile and an amusing complication of lovers afforded a suspense interest well sustained to the end. In the last act the girl appears at a ball at a country house in sophisticated raiment, and the story ends in the key of mirth in which it began.

It was a delightful blending and modernization of Diana, Atlanta, Cinderella, and Rosalind; but even in the typewritten page it was amazingly alive and well calculated to evoke tears and laughter. That a play so entrancing should be buried in a safety-vault was not to be thought of, and I sat down and wrote Searles a long letter demanding that he at once forget the lost star for whom he had written the piece, suggesting the names of several well-known actresses I thought worth considering for the difficult leading role. Not satisfied with this, I telephoned a telegram to the agent at Barton for transmission to Searles at the Ohio address he had given me.

The next day passed without incident, and on the second, hearing nothing from Torrence, I began to doubt Mrs. Bashford's proximity. On the third, still hearing nothing, I harkened to an invitation from friends a New London and drove in the runabout for dinner. It was midnight when I got back, and when I reached the gates several men dashed out of the lodge and halted me.

"She's come, sir," announced Antoine, emerging from the darkness, and speaking under stress of deep emotion; "madame the widow has arrived, sir."

"Why not Cleopatra or the Queen of Sheba?" I exclaimed testily to cover my annoyance that my aunt had deflected her descent in my absence.

"Well, she was expected; the house is hers; what do you want me to do about it?" I ended with affected jocularity.

"We received her the best we could; but it was most unfortunate, your not being here, sir."

"Is that your idea, Antoine, or do

you reflect the lady's sentiments? I'm properly humiliated either way. Tell me just what she said."

"Well, sir, she just laughed when I took the liberty of apologizing."

"The sneering laughter of outraged dignity! Go ahead and give me the rest of it."

"It was at ten she came, sir, and the guard held her up, not recognizing her, here at the gate, and when the car wouldn't stop the boys chased her and fired at the tires of her machine. It was very dreadful, sir. And at the house—at the door, sir—the guard was very harsh with her, sir, most regrettable."

"You certainly made a mess of it!" I ejaculated. "But you did let her in—into her own house, we must remember—you did grant her the courtesy of a lodging for the night?" I inquired ironically.

"She's retired, sir. There was a lady with her; maybe a maid; I can't exactly say; and we did everything, sir, to make her comfortable. She was not what you might say fussy, but quite human-like. I hope you'll pardon us, sir, which was due to not being warned."

"Oh, it's all right with me, but in the morning she'll probably bounce the whole lot of us. An old lady fatigued from a journey across country and shot at on her own premises—it's a very pretty story."

Antoine was swallowing hard in his effort to continue the recital.

"You say an old lady, sir; the mistress is not really what you would call so old—not exactly, sir."

"Really a youngish party, I should say," volunteered Graves, the gardener.

Just what these veterans would call old was a matter of conjecture.

"Young or old, she would hardly relish her reception. There was a maid, and they came in a machine? Did you put up the chauffeur or did you shoot him on the spot?"

"It was a hired machine, sir; and madame sent it away. The driver was a good deal upset over the shooting. One of the rear tires was quite blown away."

"You're in luck if he doesn't have you all arrested to-morrow," I remarked consolingly.

"Mrs. Bashford seemed quite amused by the occurrence," Antoine continued. "Wonderful America!" she kept say-

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"Quite the contrary, sir. She's been up and around for an hour or more. She's been all over the place and stopped for a squint at the garage, her and the pup."

"She's been here, inspecting the garage?" I asked, glancing at my watch. It was not yet eight o'clock. The hatter died out of me; clearly it had been my duty to be on hand to pilot her over the estate, or at least to receive her at the garage. "Just what was the lady's frame of mind—as to things generally. Pardon me, she, over the row last night?"

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"She took the lower road, sir, toward the Sound and stepped off quite brisklike."

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"I trust you will not be leaving, sir," he remarked, eyeing my half-packed trunk.

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"Then Elsie and I will be going too, sir. It's most uncomfortable they're making us—Dutch and the rest. That Antoine and his army keep pestering us and callin' us Huns. It's most disagreeable we find it, the wife and me."

"Suffer and be strong—that's the watchword! We will hope that Mrs. Bashford is a woman of sound sense and tact who will exert herself to restore peace on her property. When I call to pay my respects and make my adieux I shall speak to her of the situation and vouch for your loyalty. You haven't, I suppose, seen the widow yet—she's probably sleeping late."

"Quite the contrary, sir. She's been up and around for an hour or more. She's been all over the place and stopped for a squint at the garage, her and the pup."

"She's been here, inspecting the garage?" I asked, glancing at my watch. It was not yet eight o'clock. The hatter died out of me; clearly it had been my duty to be on hand to pilot her over the estate, or at least to receive her at the garage. "Just what was the lady's frame of mind—as to things generally. Pardon me, she, over the row last night?"

"Oh, no, sir; quite cheerful and friendly. She's ordered a big car from New York and told me it would be coming up to-day and to make a place for it."

Here was news indeed, destroying all my hopes that she meditated only a brief sojourn. The purchase of a machine meant definitely that she would remain for some time, perhaps for the winter. I poured a second cup of coffee, swallowed it, grabbed my hat and stick, and asked enlightenment as to the course taken by Mrs. Bashford when she left the garage.

"She took the lower road, sir, toward the Sound and stepped off quite brisklike."

It was the serene of September mornings, and I hurried away, thinking the cloudless blue arch, the twinkling sea, and the crisp air might serve to soften my aunt's displeasure at her hostile reception. From the conservatory I caught a glimpse of a woman on the beach—a slender, agile woman, throwing a ball for the amusement of a fog-tortured. The two were having no end of a good time. She laughed joyfully when the ball fell into her hands and the terrier barked his discomfiture and eagerness for a chance to redeem himself.

Antoine's equivocal statement as to Mrs. Bashford's age was ridiculous. Instead of the middle-aged woman whom I was prepared to meet, here was beyond question a vigorous, healthy being whose every movement spoke for youth and the joy of life. It might, after all, be the maid of whom Antoine had spoken. I reached a low stone wall that separated the lawn from the beach just as she effected a running pick-up of the ball. She turned swiftly and flung it straight at my head. Involuntarily I put up my hand and caught it just as she saw me and cried out—a cry of warning and contrition. I tossed the ball to the dog.

"What must you think of me!" she exclaimed. "I was blinded by the sunlight and I didn't see you—really I did not!"

"I had no business being in the way," I laughed, noting first her glowing color, her violet eyes—amazingly fine eyes they were—her fair hair with its golden glint, her plain black gown with lawn collar and wristbands. It was her age, however, that roused me to instant speculation. Twenty-five, I decided, was a maximum; more likely she was not more than twenty-two, and if I had been told that eighteen was the total of her years I shouldn't have had the heart to dispute it.

"Bob Singleton," I said and stupidly added, "and you are Mrs. Bashford?" unable for the life of me to avoid turning the statement into an inquiry.

"I am your aunt Alice," she said with a smile, putting out her hand. "Down, Rex!" she commanded the dancing terrier; "lie down; school's over now"; whereupon Rex obediently sprawled in the sand and began trying to swallow the ball.

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