The Lady of Darracourt

CHAPTER I.

One bright, sunny evening in June a small crowd of persons was gathered around the lodge gates of an old English mansion. A few yards from the gate had been erected one of those preposterous structures of slender timber, ivy, and evergreens, known as triumphal arches, but which might just as appropriately be styled arches of destruction, as they not seldom descend upon the unfortunate heads of the individuals they are erected to honor.

Beside the arch, which bore the inscription, in rather groggy and uncertain letters, "Welcome to Darracourt!" was placed the Darracourt brass band, each man thereof holding his instrument of torture in readiness to lift to his lips or apply to his drum the moment the carriage he was expecting came in sight.

At a turn of the drive, after passing through the great iron gates, the court itself could be seen, and here, gathered in the hall, were the court servants, in new liveries and dresses, ready to form into line directly the band began to howl; and the butler, stately as a duke and a great deal more pompous, stood upon the broad, stone steps, shading his eyes with his hand, and trying to look as if he were perfectly indifferent to, and far, above the vulgar excitement which characterized the rest of the less noble expectants.

On the broad, gravel sweep, which lay smooth as marble before the steps with their guardian stone lions, were scattered half a dozen grooms, their hands upon their belts, their eyes turned toward the lodge.

It might have been an empress, or a famous general, or, say a duke at least, that their people were lying in wait for, seeing the ceremony and the excitement attending it, but, in truth, the arrival they were all awaiting was that of a young girl, scarcely turned twenty, the heiress, indeed the mistress of the court, of the vast estate contained in a ring fence around it, of the massive plate which had been the envy of the covetous James, of the cattle that browsed upon the neighboring hills, of all the wealth that the Darracourts had amassed and inherited since they came over with the never-to-be-forgotten William, surnamed the Conqueror.

Five, ten minutes of expectancy and suspense passed; then the butler drew out his watch, which the page had been heard irreverently to describe as a frying pan, and, consulting it with an air of conferring upon it an inestimable favor, remarked, solemnly:

"The train must be late!"

"Or, perhaps, she's missed it!" ventured one of the grooms, suggestively. Mr. Somes, the butler, turned upon him severely.

"She? Who's 'she?' When you are speaking of your superiors sir, give them a name. Miss Darracourt, if you please."

The groom touched his hat apologetically.

"Miss Darracourt, I mean, Mr. Somes," he said humbly.

"Then say "Miss Darracourt," retorted Mr. Somes. "No, young man. I don't think Miss Darracourt has missed her train. Darracourts are not given to missing their trains, and I apprehend that if Miss Darracourt were late the train would wait!"

"I dessay, sir," said the groom, and utterly overcome by the rebuke, he shrank a little farther from his superior.

Miss Darracourt had not missed her train. At that moment, indeed, the open carriage, drawn by four horses with an outrider, had passed from the station yard, and the faint echo of a distant cheer had caused the Darracourt brass band to clutch their awful instruments still tighter.

There were three persons seated in the carriage. An old lady, with a bland and rather expressionless face, who sat with her back to the horses, and two young ladies on the seat opposite. One was Miss Darracourt's friend, companion, what you will; a handsome girl, with fair hair, which the wind had blown into silken tendrils, with bluish gray eyes, and a complexion which is generally termed blonde. She would have been lovely but for a certain thinness of the well-formed lips, and an expression in the eyes which make her look cunning—no, not exactly cunning. Sharp? Scarcely sharp. Let us say too observant.

The other was Miss Darracourt herself.

To describe the mistress of the court is difficult.

There is an exalted personage whose claims to be a critic of general beauty no one will deny, and he has stated that beauty lies in expression. If that be so, and it is so, then Lucille Darracourt was lovely beyond compare. She was tall and slight, her figure lithe and graceful as an Indian's is supposed to be, but seldom is. Her hair—woman's chief glory, as Prior says—was the warm brown which is generally known as auburn and it is a fact that women whose hair is of this glorious tint are always blessed with an abundance of it. Her eyes were brown, a rich, warm brown, like to the hazel, and darkened by the brows thick and drawn straight across. Wonderful eyes, which were capable of any and every expression which the will of their owner might wish to convey — eyes mated to lips full and yet not sensuous and red as the cherry. Her complexion, as might have been expected of such a colored hair, was creamy, and yet not pale; for without warning the young blood would ise to the beautiful face, and add its color to the general commonwealth. If there was a more beautiful woman than Lucille Darracourt as she rode into her inheritance, it is one of the best known pictures of Joshua Reynolds, the picture which a great art critic declared to surpass any living woman as real flowers surpass artifical ones.

The old lady, Mrs. Dalton, sat stiffly in the carriage, bland and smiling; Miss Marie Verner the companion, bent forward with a half amused, half ironical smile; but Lucille Darracourt leaned back with a somewhat dreamy expression on her lovely face. It was not melancholy, it was not apathetic; it is difficult to say what it was beyond thoughtful and somewhat sad.

As they passed under one of the triumphal arches, and the crowd cheered, one man, more observant than his fellows remarked:

"She's mighty beautiful, but she's mighty proud."

"Proud," exclaimed a neighbor; "all the Darracourts are proud and with reason."

The carriage approached the last and the largest of the triumphal arches, the one near the gate, and the road was lined with villagers, who waved their hats and shouted. Miss Darracourt leaned forward and bowed her beautiful head, and then dropped back, and Miss Verner, who of course, did not bow, looked sharply from one side to the other, then turned her eyes upon the occasion of the demonstration.

"My dear Lucille," she exclaimed with a half laugh, "how cool you are!"

"Cool," said Lucille, letting her eyes rest for a moment on the eager ones of her companion.

"Cool! Yes. Snow. Ice. Good heavens, look at me! I'm all excitement. Even Mrs. Dalton is moved; aren't you?"

"It is a most touching spectacle," said the old lady, with prim urbanity.

"Most touching," exclaimed Maire Verner, mimicking her; "and, yet, Lucille, you take it as if you had been used to it all your life."

"What would you have me do?" asked Lucille Darracourt, quietly.

"What would I have you do? Anything. Everything."

"If I were a man, I might get up and take off my hat and thank them; but I am not a man."

"But even a poor, miserable woman might show some emotion," retorted Miss Vernor. "But you sit there and take it all as if you were an empress. Who would think that one month—a week —ago, you were a half-starved pupil in the south of France!"

"We were very well fed," says Lucille, with a smile.

"Bah, I know. But think of it. A pupil at a school at St. Malo, with no expectation of anything better, and now the sole mistress of — all this!" and she waved her hand to right and left. "If anything were needed to prove that you are a Darracourt, which, thank Heaven, there is not, your demeanor would complete the evidence."

A faint flush spread over the clear, oval face of Lucille Darracourt.

"You forget," she said, "that all this welcome is meant for the heir—the owner—of Darracourt. It is not meant for me, for me myself! If I had been any one else—old, middle-aged, a man, for instance, they would have shouted just as heartily. It is the owner of Darracourt they are welcoming, not me, Lucille."

"Well, but you are the owner of Darracourt," argued Marie Verner, "and it is for you, and yet you sit there as calm and cool—— Oh, good gracious me, what is that!"

It was the Darracourt brass band, which, having caught sight of the carriage, had burst forth into disharmony.

We are near the house. That is the brass band.

Miss Verner leaned forward, and as she did so, she saw through the trees which lined the lane a large edifice to the left of the Court.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing her sunshade at it. "That must be Merle Hall, Lucille! See!"

Lucille glanced aside, and just caught a glimpse of the long, white facade shining between the trees.

"That's the Marquis of Merle's place," said Miss Verner, eagerly. "Your nearest neighbor, Lucille! Next to yourself, the most important person in Darracourt. What a beautiful place!"

Lucille Darracourt turned her head, and glanced at it with faint interest.

"Your nearest neighbor, Lucille. I wonder whether he will be here to welcome you. He is very poor, and ought, therefore, to be very polite."

"How do you know all this?"

Marie Verner tossed her head, and laughed, her keen eyes looking to left and right, and taking in everything, as she answered:

"Mr. Head, the lawyer, told me," she said. "He might have told you, too, but you were too absent-minded, too absorbed by your new greatness to pay any attention. Details are my forte; I revel in them."

"I don't think we ought to talk so much," remarked Mrs. Dalton, gravely; "we distract Miss Darracourt from her duties!"

"Duties!" echoed Marie Verner; "what duties? All she has to do is to bow acknowledgments to the homage of her adherents and retainers."

"And the proper demeanor to be observed in acknowledging the respectful greetings of a crowd is no light matter," said Mrs. Dalton, solemnly. "I have heard my father, who was aide-de-camp to the great Duke of Wellington, declare that the reception of the homage of a crowd required grace and genius combined."

"Then Lucille has them to perfection!" replied Marie Verner promptly. "An empress couldn't smile and bow more graciously and gratefully! I do wonder whether the marquis will be there to meet us! You don't know, I suppose, that Darracourt itself belonged to the late marquis, and that it was only by a fluke that your uncle got it?"

"I am afraid I know very little about anything! You shall tell me when we get"—she paused a second—"home."

"Oh, Mr. Head will be there; he'll tell you. He likes to hear himself talk! It's a strange story! Oh, what a crowd! Look, Lucille; what magnificent gates! Behold, we are nearing our palace!"

The carriage, with its four grays and postilions, had reached the lodge gates, and passed under the arch. The Darracourt brass band played out its loudest, the people shouted, the men waved their hats, and one or two children, made bold by the beauty of their new mistress, ran up to the carriage and tossed some wild flowers into Lucille's lap.

The gates flew open with a clang, but the carriage still remained standing, and an old man in a smock frock hobbled forward.

"The oldest inhabitant," whispered Marie Verner. "Now, Lucille, present arms and prepare to receive—a speech."

The old man came forward, bare-headed, and peered up at the ladies.

"Which be the young mistress?" he quavered.

"I am Miss Darracourt."

"And I be Simon Taller, miss; the oldest man on the estate. I be come to wish you welcome the Court, Miss. And welcome you be; God bless your pretty face!"

This abrupt conclusion of what was evidently a great speech gone wrong, so exactly hit the sentiment of the crowd that they cheered and cheered, until the terrible arch shook again.

The flush deepened on the face of the beautiful girl, then faded away, and left her rather pale, as she bent forward.

"Thank you, thank you all very much," she said. "I hope, I am sure, that we shall be great friends. Thank you once more."

It wasn't very much of a speech, but the musical voice, with the Darracourt ring in it, seemed to make up for the brevity of the oration, and go straight to the hearts of the simple people. They cheered, and shouted, and pressed round the carriage, and it was not until the prancing of the restlesse horses threatened to deal death and destruction all round that the carriage was permitted to go on its way.

"What an article this will make in the local paper!" said Marie Verner. "Arrival of the heiress at the Court! Magnificent reception by the tenantry! Crowd surrounding the carriage! Strewn with flowers! Eloquent address by Miss Darracourt!"

Lucille smiled, her eyes fixed upon the Court, which now came into view, her fingers caressing the flowers.

"You have a fine talent for burlesque, Marie," she said.

"Haven't I? It is my only gift. If I could only have persuaded that old man to dance a breakdown, I should have been completely and ecstatically happy."

"Really, Miss Verner," said Mrs. Dalton, in solemn remonstrance, "the present does not appear to me a fitting moment for such pronounced levity. Dance, a—a breakdown!"

"Hush!" said Marie Verner. "Here we are! Who are those on the steps, Lucille? There's Mr. Head, and the butler—or is it the bishop? But that other! Oh, Lucille, that's the marquis, I'm convinced!"

Mr. Somes, the butler, had two gentlemen standing beside him. One, a middle-aged man, with a round face and iron-grey hair, was Mr. Head, the lawyer; the other, a young, tall, thin gentleman, with dark eyes and a rather pale face, was none other than the marquis. He stood slightly apart from the others, his hands, long and white, resting upon his stick, his dark eyes fixed upon the carriage, a faint smile curving his smooth-shaven lips. The face was delicately cut, and would have been handsome but for a something vague and indefinite which impressed one upon first seeing it with a sense of disfavor. It was difficult to say what it was, seeing that there was not an ugly line in the whole run of the features. Perhaps it was because of a certain hardness in the eyes and rigidity in the lips; perhaps it was a slight scar which drew a line of a couple of inches over the felt temple. Let it be what it might, it struck Lucille instantly.

With much dashing and prancing, the postilions brought their horses up to the steps, the grooms rushed forward and seized the reins, the butler opened the carriage door with the air of a bishop opening a cathedral, and Mr. Head, hat in hand, stood ready to assist the ladies to alight.

"Welcome home, Miss Darracourt!" he said, pleasantly.

Lucille stood for a moment, her beautiful face slightly flushed; then, as she ascended the steps, followed by the two ladies, the tall, thin gentleman came forward and uncovered his head.

"Permit me, also, to offer you a welcome, Miss Darracourt," he said, and as he spoke his eyes rested upon her face for a moment with carefully hidden surprise and admiration, then shifted to his boots. "As your nearest neighbor, I have taken the liberty to be present and assist in your reception." The voice was soft and not unmusical, but it was slow and measured, like the vague something in the face, smote a discordant echo upon the ear. "Ifear it has been a long and wearisome journey."

"It has been long, but I am not tired," said Lucille, as she shook hands. "This is Mrs. Dalton and Miss Verner, Lord Merle."

The marquis glanced from one to the other and saluted them, then his eyes returned to Mary Verner and rested on her face as they had rested on Lucille's, for a moment, no longer.

He placed himself by Lucille, and the two entered the hall together. A murmur, which was just short of a cheer, rose from the servants drawn up in line, and Lucille, bending her head in acknowledgment, passed with the marquis into the drawing room.

The marquis drew a chair forward for her.

"Having availed myself of the earliest opportunity of welcoming you, Miss Darracourt," he said, "I will now take my leave; you must need rest. I hope you will remember that I am your neighbor—your near neighbor—and that if you are in need of my services, you will not hesitate to send for me. I am entirely at your command."

"Thank you, my lord," said Lucille.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, bowing to the others, and with slow, stately steps he left the room.

"Why didn't you ask him to dinner?"

"I am rather tired, I find after all."

Mrs. Dalton went into the hall and returned with a maidservant.

"Here is your maid, Miss Darracourt," she said.

"I will show you to your rooms, miss,"

"Dinner, miss, can be served in an hour," said the butler with mighty humility.

Lucille inclined her head and passed out into the hall and up the broad stairs to the long corridor.

(To be continued.)

The Unanimous Conclusion

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AFFLICTED FAMILY.

DOUBLE FUNERAL FROM A FARM NI PUSLINCH.

Ten Deaths Since Last Fall Attributed to Pneumonia—An Official Investigation to be Made—Three of Them Died Within a Few Days of Each Other.

Guelph, May 14.—A double funeral took place to-day from the old Foster farm, Puslinch, near the city. They were John Foster and Mrs. Healey, the only son and daughter of Mr. Robert Foster, one of the oldest residents of Guelph, who still survives. The family have been greatly afflicted since last fall, some ten of the connection having passed away from what the doctors say is pneumonia, and to which the family are susceptible. John Foster and two sons have died, one is sick in St. Joseph's Hospital who is not expected to live, and the mother.

There are rumors about the cause of so many deaths in such a short time in the same family, and Mr. Peterson, Crown Attorney, has ordered a thorough investigation. Many think that it is attributable to the water. The deceased John Foster had been an employee in Bell & Company's for some thirteen years, and was highly esteemed.

Crown Attorney Peterson commenced an investigation to-day in connection with recent deaths in the family. Every member of the family has been down with what the medical men pronounced pneumonia of a severe type. Three of them, the father, son, and a sister of Mr. Foster's, died within a few days of one another, the latter expiring yesterday. Two other members of the family died a few months ago, and altogether, there have been ten deaths among connections since October.

THUMPED THE APOSTLE.

Civil War at Zion Over Merits of the Leaders.

Chicago, May 14.—Serious riots broke out in Zion City to-day. Crowds gathered on Shiloh Boulevard and engaged in a furious argument over the respective merits of Dowie and Voliva. James Slater, a negro adherent of Dowie, was escorted to safety by policemen, after he had been beaten for his sturdy defence of the apostle. The crowd again assembled after the departure of the police, and another riot call was sent in, which brought out all the reserves. The police fear further trouble, and have called in all the patrolmen from outlying points for possible emergency duty.

Mrs. Dowie, in an attempt to force her husband to change his will so as to leave her one-third of the property, is said to have beaten him. Two negro attendants separated the apostle and his belligerent spouse.

COUGHERS, HAWKERS, SPITTERS!

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SCHEME OF MOBILIZATION.

One Under Consideration, Says Earl of Portsmouth.

London, May 14.—In the House of Lords to-day the Earl of Wemyss and March, Conservative, called attention to the question of home defence. He asserted that the country was practically without an arm and that there were not 60 up-to-date guns in the country. The question, he said, would be solved if the Government had the courage to adopt the system of compulsory service at home and voluntary service abroad.

The Earl of Portsmouth, Parliamentary Secretary of the War Office, replying, said the Government had a mobilization scheme under which it was hoped it could mobilize its forces for defence as quickly as any continental power. Further schemes had been prepared for the defence of British ports, which would be placed in a position to resist any sudden attack.

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AN INDIAN POTENTATE.

The Gackwar of Baroda Arrives in New York.

New York, May 13.—His Highness the Gaekwar of Baroda, accompanied by his wife, the Maharanee, and his brother, Sampatras, landed to-day from the steamer Celtic from Liverpool. The Gaekwar is the second greatest prince in India, and the direct descendant of one of the Mahratta Generals who were rulers of India when the East India Company wrested control from them. He is the ruler of the State of Baroda, which has a population of 2,000,000, and an area of 8,000 square miles. The Maharanee is 23 years old, and is the mother of three children, the oldest being the daughter, thirteen years old, who will be married in the fall.

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