

Fashion designer Lucile,
Lady Duff Gordon, in 1904.



FASHION'S QUEEN

BEFORE CHANEL THERE WAS LUCILE, THE ONTARIO FARM GIRL WHO BECAME THE MOST FAMOUS FASHIONISTA OF THE EDWARDIAN AGE.

BY HUGH BREWSTER

"LOOKING BACK ON IT ALL,"

wrote Lucile, Lady Duff Gordon in her memoir, "it seems strange that the step which would lead to my greatest happiness should have been taken in a moment of intense sorrow." In the spring of 1892, the woman who would become the foremost couturière of her time was penniless and living with her young daughter, Esmé, in her mother's tiny flat in London, England. Her alcoholic husband had abandoned her. She needed to find work, but the choices for genteel women were limited. One day while making a little dress for Esmé, she had a flash of inspiration. "Whatever I could or could not do," she thought, "I could make clothes. I would be a dressmaker."

Lucy could indeed make clothes — for most of her life it had been a necessity. Her childhood had been spent in a stone farmhouse overlooking the small town of Guelph, Ontario. A highlight of each year at Summer Hill, as the farm was known, was the arrival of a barrel of cast-off clothes sent by the family's relatives in France. Lucy and her younger sister, Elinor, would shiver with excitement as the top of the barrel was pried off and Parisian gowns, hats, and even corsets and wigs spilled out. Bolts of cloth were sometimes included, and Lucy used the scraps to create outfits for her dolls; later she would make clothes for her sister and mother.

Her father, Douglas Sutherland, had first come to Guelph in 1858 to work as a civil engineer for the Grand Trunk Railway. He soon came calling on pretty sixteen-year-old Elinor Saunders, one of the eight daughters of the local magistrate. By 1861 they were married, and on June 13, 1863, Lucy Christiana Sutherland was born in London, England, where Elinor was staying in

lodgings while Douglas worked on a railway tunnel in Italy. A second daughter was born in October of the following year and named Elinor, for her mother. Not long after that, however, Douglas Sutherland contracted typhoid fever and died.

His young widow had little choice but to return to Canada with her two small daughters and live with her parents at Summer Hill. Lucy soon became a favourite of her grandfather Colonel Thomas Saunders but often ran afoul of her grandmother, a stern Victorian matriarch who insisted on enforcing Old World manners. Nevertheless, Lucy became a tomboy, "a typical little Canadian girl," in her words, "independent and resourceful. I was always the one who was caught stealing apples, or falling into the duck pond or chasing the hens."

Elinor Sutherland keenly mourned the loss of her husband, but in 1871 she agreed to marry David Kennedy, an elderly Scotsman, largely because he promised to take her away from Guelph and her overbearing mother. The next year the family sailed for England and eventually settled in a rented house near St. Helier on Jersey in the Channel Islands. The centre of Jersey's social life was the lieutenant-governor's mansion, and it was at a regimental ball there in 1881 that eighteen-year-old Lucy met a young officer who became her first love.

When he jilted her, the ever-impetuous Lucy fled to England, vowing to marry "the next man who asks me." That proved to be James Wallace, a wine merchant with a marked fondness for the product he sold, who gave her what she called "the worst six years I ever knew." When he left her for a music-hall dancer in 1891, Lucy decided to divorce him, a move that was both expensive and stigmatizing at the time, particularly for a woman.

Actress Lily Elsie wears one of the large hats Lucile designed for *The Merry Widow*.



CRAZY BIG HATS

The phenomenal success of Franz Lehár's 1907 operetta *The Merry Widow* spawned a host of tie-in products, from sheet music and gramophone records to cigars and cocktails. But nothing had the impact of the Merry Widow hat. The popularity of actress Lily Elsie and her distinctive, Lucile-created look – a large hat atop piled-up hair above a slimmer clothing silhouette – launched a major fashion trend. As rival milliners struggled to meet the demand, the hats grew ever-larger, becoming targets of cartoons and satiric postcards. When Merry Widow hats were offered as a giveaway at a Broadway performance in June 1908, it caused a stampede of pushing and shoving that the *New York Times* dubbed “the Battle of the Hats.” The craze lasted until 1911, when hats began to diminish in size; but by then it had made Lucile a household name.

– Hugh Brewster

Not long after Lucy's 1892 epiphany about becoming a dressmaker, a friend came to call and mentioned that she needed a new tea gown for an upcoming country house party. Tea gowns, or “teagies,” as they were known, were filmy, pretty creations worn without corsets at tea time — also the hour when gentlemen called on their mistresses. Lucy set to work creating a tea gown with soft, accordion-pleated folds, patterned on one she had seen in a play. It drew a host of admiring comments at the house party, and before long every woman who had seen it wanted one like it. Soon Lucy had to hire an assistant to help her fill the demand.

By 1893 she had four assistants and a shop called Maison Lucile on Old Burlington Street. It soon became the talk of fashionable London, largely because of a room hung with pink taffeta where undergarments — hitherto known as “unmentionables” — were displayed. Instead of the plain white cambric underwear that proper women were supposed to wear, Lucile's Rose Room offered pastel knickers and pale pink lingerie. “Half the women flocked to see them though they had not the courage to buy them at first,” Lucy recalled. “Those cunning little lace

motifs ... those saucy velvet bows ... might surely be the weapons of the woman who was ‘not quite nice.’” But when Lucile's cobweb-like creations were adopted by aristocratic women in the Prince of Wales' circle, others in society soon followed.

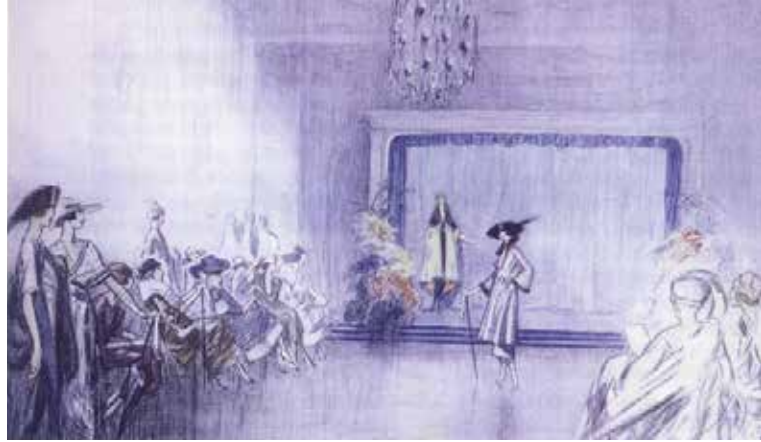
Lucy's sister, Elinor, now a stunning beauty with perfect pale skin and billowing red hair, was adept at promoting Lucile's designs in aristocratic circles. She had married an Essex squire, Clayton Glyn, in 1892, and the couple was regularly invited to weekend house parties at Easton Lodge, the country home of Daisy, Countess of Warwick, a favourite of the Prince of Wales.

Glyn, however, soon proved to be a feckless spendthrift, and Elinor was forced to begin writing to generate needed income. Her first novel, *The Visits of Elizabeth*, published in 1900, satirized the goings-on she had witnessed at country house weekends. But it was the publication of a steamy romance in 1907, called *Three Weeks*, that made her both famous and notorious. The story of a three-week affair between a handsome young army officer and an exotic older woman, the book was a runaway success and sold more than five million copies worldwide despite being banned in Boston and, for a time, in Canada. The key seduction scene in *Three Weeks* takes place on a couch draped in a tiger skin, and it prompted an anonymous bit of doggerel that would forever dog Elinor: “Would you like to sin/ with Elinor Glyn/ on a tiger skin? Or would you prefer/ to err with her/ on some other fur?”

In 1897 Maison Lucile moved to a townhouse on London's posh Hanover Square. Lucy decorated the rooms with grey silk wall coverings and installed elegant chairs and couches where customers could sip tea while choosing clothes. This was a world away from the utilitarian dressmakers' quarters of the time. Instead of stuffed dummies displaying her frocks, Lucy had living mannequins, shopgirls whom she carefully groomed into the world's first fashion models with glamorous sobriquets like “Corisande,” “Dolores,” and “Gamela.”

Shortly after she had moved to even larger quarters on Hanover Square in the spring of 1904, Lucy sent out engraved invitations to her first fully staged “fashion parade,” to be held on a purpose-built in-house stage. On April 28 a glittering crowd of prominent women showed up to find her premises decorated with more than three thousand handmade silk roses. As the lights dimmed, a string orchestra began playing. “I shall never forget the long-drawn breath of admiration,” Lucy later wrote, when “the first of my glorious girls stepped upon the stage, pausing to show herself a moment before floating along the room to a burst of applause.” The next day the orders flowed in, and within months she was putting on as many as three fashion shows a day. One newspaper dubbed this new phenomenon “Lady Duff and Her Stuff,” since by then Lucy had acquired the title of Lady Duff Gordon.

Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon, a tall, reserved Scottish baronet, was an early investor in Lucile Ltd. who had soon become captivated by the small, spirited woman behind the enterprise. Cosmo's mother, however, was adamantly opposed to a scandalous union with a divorcee, so they were not married until after her death in 1900. The fact that Lucy was divorced and “in trade” had also excluded her from polite society, so instead



Left: Dancer Irene Castle wears a chiffon Lucile gown named "Love in the Mist" in the Broadway hit *Watch Your Step* in 1914. Above: A Lucile fashion show is depicted in London's *Tatler* magazine in 1920. Below: A Lucile wedding dress worn by a bride from Michigan in 1918. Below right: Film star Alice Brady models a Lucile negligee and peignoir in 1919. Bottom left to right: A trio of Lucile creations includes sketches for an evening dress of green silk and white lace, 1917, a 1915 suit, inspired by a British soldier's uniform, and a gown worn by actress Billie Burke in the 1917 play *The Rescuing Angel*.



she had mingled with London artists, bohemian aristocrats, and performers in what was known as café society.

She made friends with the actress Ellen Terry, which led to her being asked to design costumes for plays. At the time, clothes worn on the stage tended to be made of stiff brocades and velvets that Lucy described as hanging in “heavy, lifeless folds.” By using lighter fabrics and creating clothes that could have been worn offstage as well as on, Lucy brought a new realism to theatrical design. An added benefit was that customers soon flocked to Maison Lucile asking for clothes they had seen in West End plays.

In 1907 she dressed the actresses in the first London production of the Viennese operetta *The Merry Widow*. It became a huge hit, and the large plumed hats Lucile created for the singing star Lily Elsie spawned a worldwide mania for oversized

millinery. “We made thousands of pounds through the craze,” Lucy recalled. “It carried the name of ‘Lucile’ all over Europe and the States.” With West End shows clamouring for Lucile costumes, Broadway soon followed suit. Her gauzy frocks were seen so often on the New York stage that author Edna Ferber grumbled: “A gurgle and a Lucile dress don’t make a play.”

But Lucile gowns often did make a musical. For the Broadway hit *Irene* she provided the requisite blue dress for the show’s hit song “Alice Blue Gown”; when ballroom dancer Irene Castle made her Broadway debut in Irving Berlin’s *Watch Your Step*, she wore the swirling Lucile dresses that became her signature. After seeing one of Lucile’s fashion parades, producer Florenz Ziegfeld was inspired to put showgirls in his famous Follies and commissioned Lucile to costume his lovely ladies. (One of

“READ ALL ABOUT THE TITANIC COWARD!”

“Shouldn’t we try to get into that boat?” Lucile, Lady Duff Gordon asked her husband, Cosmo, as they stood on the top deck of the *Titanic* shortly before 1:00 a.m. on April 15, 1912. When the order for “women and children only” had been given, crewmen had tried to pull Lucy and her assistant, Laura Francatelli, toward the lifeboats, but they wouldn’t leave without Cosmo. After three lifeboats had been lowered, the crowd dispersed, and Lucy suddenly noticed that a smaller emergency boat was being prepared for loading. Following some prodding by Lucy, Cosmo asked First Officer William Murdoch if they could get in the boat.

“Yes, I wish you would,” he responded. Once the Duff Gordons and Francatelli had climbed in, Murdoch allowed two American men to board as well. He then put two seamen in to handle the oars and, seeing no more passengers on the deck, told five stokers who had come up from below that they could jump in, too. He instructed the seaman at the tiller to row away from the ship and then stand by. On reaching the sea, however, the crewman was shocked to see water creeping toward the name *Titanic* painted on the ship’s bow and decided to get away quickly. In a lifeboat that could have carried forty, there were only twelve people.

Through the darkness, the small Cunard liner *Carpathia*

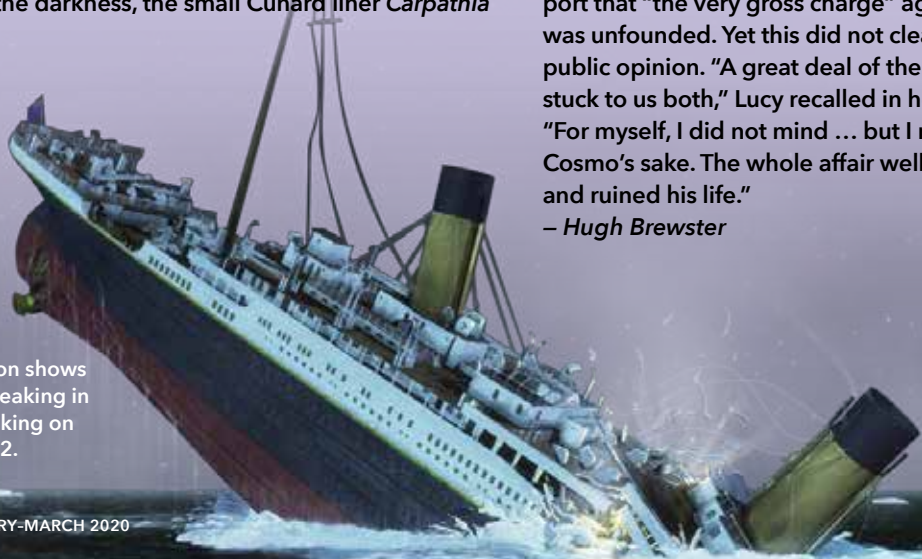
raced to the *Titanic*’s rescue, taking the survivors on board. When the *Carpathia* arrived in New York on the evening of April 18, a huge crowd clogged lower Manhattan, and throngs of newspaper reporters competed for scoops on the story of the century.

Sir Cosmo and Lady Duff Gordon were whisked off to a suite at the Ritz, where fresh clothes and champagne and flowers awaited them. Over dinner with friends Lucy gave a colourful account of their escape, which was relayed to a newspaper reporter – something she would live to regret. Three weeks later, the Duff Gordons returned to England, and Lucy described the scene that greeted them upon landing: “All over the train station were newspaper placards – ‘Duff Gordon Scandal’ ... ‘Baronet and Wife Row Away from the Drowning’ ... Newsboys ran by us shouting, ‘Read all about the *Titanic* coward.’”

With class resentments running high in the aftermath of the disaster, the fact that a titled English couple had escaped in a boat only one third full had roused intense public indignation. In a bid to clear their names, Lucy and Cosmo offered to testify before the British Titanic Inquiry. Lord Mersey, the head of the inquiry, later found in his report that “the very gross charge” against the Duff Gordons was unfounded. Yet this did not clear them in the court of public opinion. “A great deal of the mud that was flung stuck to us both,” Lucy recalled in her autobiography. “For myself, I did not mind ... but I minded very much for Cosmo’s sake. The whole affair well-nigh broke his heart and ruined his life.”

– Hugh Brewster

This illustration shows the *Titanic* breaking in two while sinking on April 15, 1912.



Lucile's fashion-show mannequins, "Dolores," would become the most famous of all Ziegfeld showgirls.)

With the advent of the cinema, Hollywood studios called on Lucile to dress their films. Silent-era stars such as Marion Davies, Norma Talmadge, and Toronto-born Mary Pickford were devotees of her fashions both on and off the screen. Lucile's "swank, saucy style," notes Randy Bryan Bigham in *Lucile: Her Life by Design*, "became the first 'Hollywood look,'" and between 1913 and 1930 she dressed more than 115 movies.

The launch of a New York branch of Lucile Ltd. in 1910 had been an immediate success, so the next year the Canadian fashion entrepreneur decided to tackle Paris, the pinnacle of fashion. "Paris will teach her a lesson," was the condescending response from the French fashion world, but when Lucile opened with one of her signature mannequin parades her salon was mobbed. "We are sure," wrote one French newspaper, "that the dramatic performance with which Lady Duff Gordon startled Paris today will be copied by every self-respecting couturier here before long." It was a very sweet triumph for a girl from the Canadian backwoods who had once received cast-off clothes from Paris. She decided to make the French capital her base and purchased a lavish villa in Versailles named the Pavillon Mars.

By the spring of 1912 the New York salon needed larger premises. Staff sent a cable urging her to come over quickly to inspect a new location. And so, as she later wrote, "I booked a passage on the first available boat. The boat was the *Titanic*." Lucy and Cosmo escaped from the sinking liner in a lifeboat only one-third full, for which they were pilloried in the press. A later inquiry deemed the accusations unfounded.

The *Titanic* is often seen as a warning bell for a complacent society steaming toward disaster in the trenches of the Western Front. When war broke out in 1914, Lucy decided to make New York her base. "The only alternative to closing the [Paris] branch was to make the New York branch carry it... So, rather reluctantly, for I felt like a deserter, I sailed for New York." The war seemed far away to Americans, and her business boomed; the next year she opened a Chicago salon, her most lavish yet. Cosmo stayed with Lucy in her penthouse on New York's Fifth Avenue until Genia d'Agarioff, a young Russian opera baritone she had nicknamed Bobbie, moved in. Outraged, Cosmo stormed off to London, and they lived apart until his death in 1931. She also became estranged from her sister after a thinly disguised depiction of Lucy's affair with Bobbie appeared in an Elinor Glyn novel.

Lucy poured herself into her work, launching a ready-to-wear line for Sears, Roebuck and Company, branding a perfume, and becoming a fashion adviser to millions through her columns for Hearst magazines and newspapers. In 1917 she created an elaborate charity fashion revue entitled *Fleurette's Dream at Peronne* and took it on a hugely successful national tour to raise funds for French war relief, even playing before President Woodrow Wilson in Washington, D.C. By 1918 she was exhausted; when Bobbie was felled by the Spanish influenza pandemic later that year, she was shattered. For the first time she lost interest in her business. After agreeing to amalgamate it with a wholesale



Lucy sits with her chow Mahmud in the sun room of her Long Island, New York, beach house in 1916.

company, she resigned as chairman in May of 1919 but consented to stay on as chief designer. The arrangement failed, and in 1922, after much acrimony, she severed all ties to Lucile Ltd.

With her finances in tatters, she declared personal bankruptcy. Bowed but not broken, she kept on writing her fashion columns and began designing for private clients from her small London flat, much in the way she had started her career so many years before. One client was her sister, with whom she was now reconciled, though it was somewhat bittersweet that Elinor was now enjoying great success as a screenwriter and director in Hollywood. In 1932 Lucy published her autobiography, *Discretions and Indiscretions*, which became a bestseller. Two years later she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and on April 20, 1935, four years to the day after Cosmo's death, she died in a London nursing home at the age of seventy-one. Husband and wife are buried together in Brookwood Cemetery near London.

For the next few decades, Lucy was best remembered for her role in the *Titanic* disaster, with cameos of her featured in movies about the sinking. For the 1964 film version of *My Fair Lady*, designer Cecil Beaton channelled Lucile's big hats and modelled the dress in which Audrey Hepburn "could have danced all night" on a gown Lily Elsie had worn in *The Merry Widow*. Lucile designs also provided costume inspiration for television's *Downton Abbey*, and she is mentioned in both the television series and the 2019 movie.

Today, books, documentaries, and museum exhibitions are recognizing the extraordinary contribution to the history of fashion made by the girl from Guelph who dazzled the world. 🐾