



# THE IT GIRL

WENDY DENNIS

How's this for a bio? Toast of Edwardian high society. Thirty-year career as couturier to royalty and brightest lights of the day, including Isadora Duncan, Margot Asquith, the Duchess of York and Elsie de Wolfe. Couture houses in London, New York, Paris and Chicago. Homes in Knightsbridge, Versailles and the Bois de Boulogne. Titanic survivor. *New York Times* obit.

Lady Duff Gordon (or Lucile as she was known) lived large but began modestly. Born in 1863 in London, England, and raised in Guelph, Ont., she married at 18 and had a child, but the marriage ended leaving her virtually penniless. To meet the bills, she set up a dressmaking business. Her "personality dresses," featuring diaphanous lines and lavish embellishments, soon caught on for they brought freedom and grace back to women's fashions after the stultifying Victorian era. A few years later, Maison Lucile had become one of the great couture houses of London; other salons soon followed. As managing money was not her thing, she shrewdly took a business partner, Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon, whom she later married. Apparently, conventional marriage wasn't her thing either — she travelled frequently and in another shrewd move, rarely lived with him.

Her thing was *savoir-faire* — and there she shone. A design trailblazer and groundbreaking entrepreneur with huge ambitions, outrageous determination and enormous success, Lucile was an original. The brilliant, enigmatic and high-spirited arbiter of style was light years ahead of her time. Her creations bridged the 19th and 20th centuries, high society and the demi-monde, the fashion designer's art and the client's personality. Accordingly, on March 1, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York will honour her contributions to fashion in *Designing the It Girl: Lucile and Her Style*, an exhibit featuring her extensive archives and sumptuous designs, including negligees, tea gowns, formal afternoon ensembles, picture frocks, evening gowns and costumes for the Ziegfeld Follies.

Lucile has one of those CVs that's so ridiculously impressive, it makes you either want to kill yourself or get off your ass right this minute and build an empire. She was reputed to have been the first to design the split skirt, hold a mannequin show and use the word "chic" in reference to women's fashion. Long

before it was *de rigueur*, she was dressing the Princess Dianas and Nicole Kidmans of her day in dramatic evening dresses and flowing tea gowns. She popularized negligees, produced the first runway shows, costumed the London premier of *The Merry Widow* and Broadway's *Ziegfeld Follies*. Her clients were the first It girls. Her sister, renowned romance novelist Elinor Glyn, coined the phrase.

People whispered about Lucile. The talk wasn't always pretty. She was divorced. She travelled in royal circles but, unlike the British nobility, worked for a living. Fleeing the Titanic, she and her husband were alleged to have commandeered a virtually empty lifeboat, boarded their personal servants, and bribed the sailors not to rescue the others. She was nothing if not aesthetically focused. As she watched the ship sink amidst screaming passengers, she is reported to have said to her secretary, "There is your beautiful nightdress gone."

But then there were those heartbreakingly gorgeous dresses. And her definite ideas about how women should wear them. Among Lucile's style maxims were: "A girl should never dress so that the dress subjects her personality"; "A girl should never make 'sex appeal' on the street"; "One never grows tired of a simple gown"; "Wear black by all means" and "If a woman is alluring, nothing else matters." Above all, she believed in fashion as transformation: "Put even the plainest woman into a beautiful dress," she once observed, "and unconsciously she will try to live up to it."

In the 1920s, when Jazz Age flappers tossed out their flowy tea gowns and lavish evening dresses, her fortunes turned, and in 1921 she was forced to declare bankruptcy. Despite her fashion and entrepreneurial genius, Lucile was no Martha Stewart. She remained utterly bored by the nuts and bolts of money matters, a quirk that I confess I find somewhat endearing. At the bankruptcy hearings, when asked about her shareholdings, she replied: "It's all Greek to me. I don't know what a share is."

After the Titanic sank and she and her husband returned to London society, there'd been gossip and the couple was shunned. Eventually they drifted apart and, in 1931, Sir Cosmo died. Soon afterwards her business faltered, and four years later, at 71, she died in a nursing home. I just hope that she was wearing something fabulous.

Post Fashion



Clockwise from top left: Archival photograph, c. 1915, "Phyllida" ensemble by Lucile, Lucile Archive, 1915-1925, Gladys Marcus Library Special Collections, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York; Irene Castle wears a Lucile evening gown designed by Lady Duff Gordon and holds a large feather fan. c. 1910 U.S.; cover illustration for fashion show program, fall 1916: fur-trimmed suit by Lucile, Lucile Archive; archival photograph, 1919: "Dangerous Ground" evening dress by Lucile, Lucile Archive; performers in "An Arabian Night" of the "Ziegfeld Follies" of 1917: costumes were designed by Lucile, 1917; portrait of Lucile; designer sketch: water-colour, ink, silver and gold leaf on paper, c. 1915: evening dress by Lucile, Lucile Archive.