

LUCILLE LOVE, The Girl of Mystery

A Soul Thrilling Story of Love, Devotion, Danger and Intrigue

By the "MASTER PEN"

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(Synopsis of preceding chapters.)

While students together at West Point, and in love with the same girl, Sumpter Love proves Hugo Loubeque a thief, and Loubeque is dishonorably discharged. Love wins the girl. The enemy thus begins a bitter and long fight. In later years at Manila, a butler in the employ of Loubeque, now an international spy, steals valuable papers from the Government safe. General Love, Loubeque kills them with a steamship Empress, and General Love accuses Lieut. Gibson, his aide and the sweetheart of his daughter Lucille. Loubeque sends a wireless message cleverly insinuating that General Love had sold the papers to a foreign power. To save the honor of the man she loved and to erase the stigma from her father's name, Lucille prevails upon Harley, a government aviator, to take her up to the ship, in his aeroplane. To foil Lucille, Loubeque destroys the wireless apparatus on the Empress and is hurt in the resulting explosion. In her search for the papers, Lucille becomes his nurse, and when the ship takes fire, secures the papers. The vessel is burned to the water's edge and Lucille drifts to a strange island on the coast of a crushed lifeboat. Lucille is rescued by friendly natives. She is given an amulet for curing the chief's daughter, and it proved potent against the machinations of Hugo Loubeque, who, like wise cast on the island, plans to get the papers. He burns Lucille's hut, but she escapes with the precious papers. He sends a decoy message asking her to come to the home of his mistress, who is ill and in need of nursing. On the way there she falls into a covered pit, dug by Loubeque across her path. Her guide, an old crooked man, takes her to Lucille, and gives them to Loubeque, who goes with them to the jungle. His guide and servant steals them, but is killed by a lion and Lucille escapes. She is rescued three days, recovers them from the body. Lucille meets a strange cave-dwelling people, is attacked by monkeys, escapes in a canoe and is rescued by an underground whirpool. She is rescued by Captain Wetherell and taken aboard his yacht. There she meets Loubeque, who is also picked up by the yacht. When warships pursue, Wetherell seizes the papers and gives Lucille and Loubeque to sea in an open boat. Their water gives out and Lucille nearly dries before they reach China in safety. Hugo, after nursing Lucille back to life, goes after Wetherell to get the papers back, and captures him. Lucille follows Loubeque, aboard a liner, and shadows him. She is discovered during the trip to San Francisco, in the hold, and is being released, searches Loubeque's room for the papers. He catches her, ties her up, convinces the captain that she is insane, and on the vessel's arrival at port has her whirled away in a taxi to a strange home with movable floors and mysterious hooded figures and—Loubeque escapes. She steals the papers from him and escapes, but is caught. Loubeque decides to send her to his ranch in Mexico for safe-keeping.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Thompson Finds an Article of Interest.

S Thompson, the butler-thief, swiftly descended to the ground-floor and out into the court to secrete the body of the man who had fallen from the roof top, there was no trace upon his immobile countenance of the desperate struggle through which he had just been. Every movement of the man seemed timed, perfectly attuned. As he bent over the body, one leg of which was twisted out at a grotesque angle, the habit of his life still clung. Kneeling, his hands fluttered over the man like tiny, white birds. Through the pockets he went, rifling them completely and replacing those things which could be of no value to him. He stopped as he unwrapped the note Lucille had written on the scrap of paper and bound about the ruby.

For just a fractional space of time, incredulity, avarice, and puzzled delight fought for mastery upon his face, in his eyes. Round and round he turned the great, glowing ruby, his flaming eyes matching in brilliancy the shafts of light which the facets cast forth. But Thompson was perfectly trained. Secretly the ruby in his pocket, he carefully lifted his burden and carried it to the basement of the house. When he was quite through with his task, he carefully removed the traces of dust which his gruesome task had forced upon him. Then he took one last, loving look at his find and started in search of his master. Already a plan had entered his cunning brain to gain the rest of the necklace, a plan whereby Loubeque was to be no gainer.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A Thief Is Rudely Foiled.

QUIETLY, Lucille allowed herself to be conducted back to the room from which she had just made her escape. Her heart was so heavy she did not care what happened. Remembrance of her mission had faded into a blank before the omnipresent horror of the grotesque death of the ship's captain who, out of the chivalry of his own nature, had volunteered to save her. Beside the broken window she sat, plotting, planning, scheming, doing anything to drive away the morbid thoughts which harried her, the terrible visions that hovered everlastingly around her. She had tried her best, but still failure dogged her footsteps. Her sweetheart had resigned from the army under such a cloud as must have broken his spirit completely. His heart she knew was already broken by her seeming disbelief in him; her father was entangled in the same net with his aide. And she held the key to the situation, a key with no lock to fit. She alone knew where the papers that would clear up the entire mystery were located and she was a prisoner of the man who had not only woven but had also cast the net about him.

"Mr. Loubeque's compliments, Miss Lucille," murmured the butler, the notisally approached with a tiny glass of liquor, "and by the way, a tiny sip might prove beneficial to the nerves."

"Thank you, Thompson," she murmured sweetly. "Tell your present employer I shall gladly do so. But," she added, her eyes flashing maliciously, "I forgot Mr. Loubeque has been your employer right along."

The man showed by no sign that the arrow had pierced his perfect armor of deference. He merely bowed.

"Quite so, Miss Lucille. Thank you."

Before his perfect apomb, Lucille stood undecided. Her nerves were shattered and the drink she knew would do her good. But there had been that look in the man's eyes. She could not be mistaken in it. Still, how would he dare attempt anything in the house of Loubeque? She touched her tongue to the delicious, fiery stuff and waited. A sensation of comfort slowly approached her weary spirit, a feeling of lassitude, delightful after the harrowing thoughts that had annoyed her. She fought the sensation away, confident that such a tiny sip would have no such effect unless it had been doctored.

Pouring out the liquor carefully, she lay against the pillows in a posture of dreamless sleep. It was half an hour before her patience was rewarded. Then Thompson slipped stealthily into the room, a smile of eager triumph breaking the mask of his face as he glanced toward her. Lucille flexed herself, a steel spring wound to its last notch.

Thompson approached swiftly, silently, with a surety that she had always identified with him, which had made her regard him as a perfect servant before, but which appalled her now. He was beside her, leaning over her, his hand gripping at her throat. First she thought he was about to close his fingers upon her throat, but they moved, swiftly, delicately, so lightly she could scarcely feel their weight. A little exclamation of triumph as his finger pads touched the necklace. It was in his hands. And then the

From here her resolution was always clear before her, her purpose indomitable. Looking out upon the courtyard from her grated window, there was something ominous about the striped Spanish sword grass, the giant cacti with its huge fingers pointing heavenward, the stone patio that suited the mood of resolution into which she had forced herself and against which the heavy odors of the flowers, the blossoming citrus and orange trees made but scant headway.

Idling here, yet always, plotting the first move to be made when she escaped, she noticed the slightest trifle, grew acutely sensitive to every incident.

Thompson seemed upon his master's departure to have lost poise as thoughts of the ruby necklace his fingers had touched seared itself upon his brain.

She recalled how he had served in her father's house so long with never a suspicion from anyone that he was other than the perfect butler with a thought outside of his work. And then she recalled the incident of the necklace, the manner of his entering the room when he thought her under the influence of the drug, the nimble fingers that caressed her throat without touching it—Always would she shudder at the recollection, then deliberately drive it from her mind.

It was the fourth day since the departure

Hugo Loubeque waited, watching the furious girl and the ruffled butler curiously. A smile curved his lips as he turned toward her. "You object to the draught, I presume. I assure you it has no ill effects and will make the journey one of pleasure instead of weariness." Then he whirled upon the butler, his face hard as granite, his teeth clipping off each word like steel particles.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if the draught had taken effect," silkily murmured the butler.

"By what authority?"

"Asking your pardon, sir, but I suggested it and was afraid it might have a bad effect. I grew to take an interest in Miss Lucille in Manila, sir, and did not wish—"

Loubeque frowned heavily but out him short with an impatient wave of his hand. Lucille felt a sudden impulse to tell him the truth but conquered it swiftly. She could fight Thompson much easier than this man. She must keep her own council. The spy turned to her again.

"You did not take the draught?"

"No."

"I assure you on my word as a gentleman that it will cause you no inconvenience. Further, I hoped not to be obliged to tell you that if you do not take it willingly, you will be compelled to get it down."

She bent her head docilely. Resistance was out of the question, and, after all, she must save her strength to fight the big things. As he turned to give an order to the butler she interposed.

"I will do as you ask," she said quietly.

"But I would prefer a woman's bringing it to me. Also I would like your word that I shall have the constant attendance of a woman while it is effective."

Hugo Loubeque bowed slowly, and, waving his servant before him left the room. Lucille, ten minutes later, accepted the fragile glass from the mysterious woman who had abducted her at the wharf. After a moment's hesitation, a shudder at the enticing colors shed from the stuff, she drained the glass.

Langor—comfort—peace— She gave herself up to the drug with a prayer; a prayer she felt so certain would be heeded, that, in her slumber, a smile parted her lips, played about her countenance. And when she awoke she was at Loubeque's Mexican ranch.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

At the Wishing Well.

LOW, rambling houses of Spanish architecture dotted the great area which the curiously fantastic, wholly artistic fence enclosed. The grounds were laid out in orderly fashion, blooming like the Garden of Eden with a riotous profusion of flowers that rested their heavy perfumes lazily upon the ether, blending and harmonizing yet never cloying and never oppressive. Monstrous cacti, tiny hedgerows, minute sword palms, bayonet trees, everything seemed to have sought this soil. Never a suggestion of the lack of originality which the landscape gardener gives an estate, but showing a decided character that would have told the most undiscerning something of the owner's character.

This new Loubeque! Always had she associated him with the manner of her knowing him. Times he had been tender, other times he had been cruel, always was he crafty, cunning, courageous, a one-ideal man. But now he seemed all poet, painter. She could hear the softened tones of his voice as, with some of his companions, he wandered about the grounds, tenderly explaining to them the history, the beauty of the flowers, the rare species he had imported for the place. Always would he show a tender regard for the beauty of Nature which struck Lucille as almost feminine. She feared this man more than she did the one of the diary, feared him because she was learning that the warm climate was sapping her of her purpose, forging lethargy upon her more powerful than bands of iron.

It was after one of these rambles that she noticed signs of some impending change about the menage. It was while she watched the spy wandering about the gardens of a morning, wondering at the tenderness with which he would bend to the flowers, inhaling the fragrance, examining their buds and blossoms, that he suddenly walked toward her, entering the house to shortly enter her room.

"I am leaving today," he began abruptly, all the nature-lover gone from his cold, stern manner. "Again I ask you to tell me where you put the papers."

"Then they haven't been found—" She stopped abruptly, realizing that her delight had revealed quite as much as his demand.

Loubeque shook his head, studying her face keenly, evidently recognizing the steel of an unbreakable nature. He held out his hand and clasped her own, his eyes steadily fastened upon her face.

"I am sorry, Lucille, that you cannot see the folly of this. It is your last chance to tell me. It is your last chance to count me a friend. I am waiting."

She did not answer. Their eyes met and held, both filled with an unaltered purpose. Then Loubeque, without a word, left the room.

Nor did she see him again. That he had gone she knew from the laxness about the household, among his servants. It gave her food for hope. She must escape. She must. She must escape before the iron grip of dreamy languor about the place became unbreakable.

She had to fight against losing thought of everything in this bower of content. Human emotions seemed so far away from the spiritual ones which were so close to her. She could not be lulled by the intoxicating rarer even than those into day dreams of fancy rarer even than those which had come to her maiden soul in the hours when her sweetheart was by her side and perfect happiness dwelt in her heart and shadows dared not intrude.

But always when she wandered thus, always when her feet moved with her spirit, she would encounter one of Loubeque's aides, always masked, always casually surprised at coming upon her, always urbane and polite yet insistent upon turning her in an opposite direction. The surveillance was of such a nature as never to be obtrusive and never to be out of her mind. It seemed so incongruous in this place, just as the appearance of a horde of wild beasts might have appeared incongruous.

It got upon her nerves to such an extent that she finally took to the house and remained there. She felt the prison atmosphere here and there was no such startling contrast between the dream and the reality to bring her from out the clouds of her dream spirit. Every room was grated and, though she knew they were not here for the purpose, they served it admirably.

Before the great crystal ball that was set upon the flagging beside the patio fountain, beside which stood the monstrous, hoary, grey palm tree, he halted, staring through the slits of his mask into its clear depths. She trembled as she looked upon the flaming eyes so close to the reflection of her own face. Suddenly he tore the mask from him and tossed it to one side, closing his arm fiercely about her waist and drawing her soft cheek against his swarthy one. Together they stared into the ball, his eyes luminous with a wild love, hers moist with mingled sympathy and fear. Gently she disentangled his fingers, surprised at the numbness of them, the ease with which they responded to her will.

"You must go back," he murmured hoarsely.

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She recalled how he had served in her father's house so long with never a suspicion from anyone that he was other than the perfect butler with a thought outside of his work. And then she recalled the incident of the necklace, the manner of his entering the room when he thought her under the influence of the drug, the nimble fingers that caressed her throat without touching it—Always would she shudder at the recollection, then deliberately drive it from her mind.



The Spy Turned to Her Again. "You Did Not Take the Draught?" He Said.

of the master of the place, that, standing beside her iron barred window, she saw the figure of a man topping a rise in the distance and drawing swiftly nearer. There was something strangely familiar about him, something she seemed to recall. About fifteen yards away he held a short conversation with a sentry who sprang out before him. The man nodded, satisfied, and moved away. In slashed holers, tight trousers and gold braided sombrero of straw, his long black hair waving gracefully to his shoulders, the man made an impressive figure as he fastened steady, undeviating eyes upon her window until she was positive he was looking at her for a purpose. Suddenly, his right hand shot up and remained there in an obvious signal. After a moment he spurred his horse to the court yard and stamped inside. Low voices hummed in conversation, then the man appeared before her, offering his arm.

"Senior Loubeque sent me that I might escort you about the grounds, might place myself at your disposal," he murmured.

Lucille drew away from him at mention of his master, but something in the meaning eyes behind the mask reassured her and she moved out into the patio. Here they passed Thompson, whose eyes darted a message of suspicion at them, whose body seemed intent upon following. She felt the biceps of her escort flexing even after they were out of sight.

"He thinks all is not right," said the man quietly. "Well," he added with a low sigh, "he is right in his suspicion. I could not hope to fool that man. Only a little less wise is he than Hugo himself."

"Not right?" Exclamation and question it was. She drew away, clasping her hands delightedly. "Then you have come to help me—"

"I have come," he answered quietly, "because I could not help coming. I have come because since first I looked upon you—you will forgive me—there in the city home of Hugo, when I looked upon your face I have seen no other. I have come because I could not stay away. I have come against the will of the man to whom I owe everything, the man I love, because you called me, because—"

She touched his arm lightly with her fingers in mute appeal. Her woman's instinct told her that such a love as this might be turned to account, and though she hated herself for the self-delusion, she knew the woman in her would urge along anything to save her sweetheart. The blood of the leopard is that of the purring house-cat.

Slowly they wandered through the beautiful gardens, speaking of what they saw, yet never touching upon the subject nearest both their hearts. Suddenly the man seemed unable to stand the strain longer and she touched his arm sympathetically, but he drew away with a little cry of near-pain.

"Come with me to the crystal ball," he cried, "and see the vision that has haunted my eyes so long a time. Come with me to the crystal and see the face that has made me forget my vows, forget the one I love and fear, forget everything save the desire for life that I may lay down to bring a smile to it. Come with me to the crystal and see the face that, close my eyes tightly as I may, will always stand in that narrow slit between the lid and retina; see the face that has made me cry through the night, cry to the moon and to the stars, to everything in Nature for aid in gaining it; see the face that peeps at me from the heart of the rose and makes the rose blush for its own tawdriness. Come with me, lady of my heart."

Before the tempestuousness of his voice, Lucille followed his lead. Gone from her was every thought of immediate escape. She saw that the man could not be handled easily, that she could not escape from him any more than she could from the other minions of the spy without the use of craft. And yet she felt a curious sympathy for him, pain that she must harm him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Thompson's Plans Go Wrong.

IT was the following day that, leaning against the window grating of iron, she was astonished to find it bending before her. She looked more closely and was astonished to find that one bar had bent out cleanly through. She examined the remainder of the bars. They appeared absolutely untouched but when she pulled harshly at them, every one gave way. For half an hour she did not realize what had happened. Then a thrill of thanksgiving went throbbing through her heart. Ready stars were her means of escape.

Almost simultaneously with the thought came another and more terrifying one. This was probably not a means of escape so much as a means of entrance. Instantly her mind flashed a picture of the silent Thompson. First she was tempted to call for help and expose the man.

Second thought advised against this. No one must know about the rubies, no one must know about priceless stones. But what could she do?

She was still pondering the problem that night when still fully dressed she stood beside the window looking out over the moon-splashed patio. A furtive figure detached itself from the shadows and crept toward her. Strangely enough it did not frighten her to recognize the butler. She had tried her strength against the man once and knew that she could call for assistance should he enter the room.

She crouched in the opposite side of the room, listening to the faint tinkle of snapping iron bars. His head and shoulders appeared in the opening. Longer and longer grew his shadow in the room, then the faintest pat as he slipped to the floor.

Breathlessly she watched his approach. There was nothing undecided about his movements. He was swift; he was certain; he was sure. Not a motion, not a step was wasted. His whole body was coiled like a spring, ready to leap in any direction, yet there was no fear or indecision about it. He was almost over the bed, when Lucille sprang from her hiding place behind the door.

Instantly he turned, his head darting from side to side like that of a giant reptile, his beady eyes holding her own and striking terror into the very soul of her. She realized in a flash what it meant to stop a desperate thief in the midst of his marauding, realized that the man she always thought of as a servant was now a hunted beast, cornered and at bay. icy fingers clutched at her spine, while little ants' nests of nerves tingled at the back of her neck. Thompson did not speak. Slowly his hands opened and closed, while a grin crossed his face, widened his mouth, a hideously inhuman grin. She tried to cry out but her lips were frozen shut. The capable hands, the hands she recalled as always being so competent to handle anything, were opening and closing as he advanced upon her, with swiftness, with certainty and with sureness, as though already they felt in their strong yet delicate pads, the feel of her throat.

He had almost reached her side when he stopped suddenly, whirling toward the window. Lucille unconsciously followed the direction of his gaze. A long arm, the jacket sleeve of which was slashed and peiced out with gold-trimmed doe-skin was being extended into the room. Just an arm it was, yet the hand that tipped it extended still further within the room by reason of a long revolver it held. From the darkness outside came a hissing sound, an angry, snake-like sound. Then, simultaneously, with the dropping of Thompson to the floor, an orange spurt of fire leaped into the room, the whine of a bullet struck against her ears. But no report.

Lucille staggered back as her defender, the lover who had promised his assistance, leaped lightly into the room. His hand was upon her arm, his lips at her ear. Reading his thoughts, yet hearing nothing, she moved toward the window and lifted her tiny foot as though to mount a horse. His hands cupped about it. She vaulted to the casement and, in a second, had scrambled through. The breath of the night, assailed her nostrils and she opened her mouth, leaving her throat with them.

By her side stood the man. For a moment he waited, then urged her forward. She was free, free, free! Of course there were pickets to be passed, but she had made one providential escape tonight, why not another.

Out of sight of the building she paused and looked about her. How calm and peaceful and friendly appeared the night. On such a night Leander swam the Hellespont and here, beside her, stood another Leander who would brave as much, had already braved more than ever did fabled hero. The moon was full, rolling lazily about atop a mountain peak as though shaking his jolly sides with laughter at this triumph of one he loved. The stars winked merrily at her, urging her on her way. Looking back at the building from which she had gained her escape, she made of silver and all the windows were diamonds crusted there, the rigid leaves of the bayonet trees stretched upward as though guarding it, sentinel-like, against intrusion from the outside. The touch of a timid finger upon her arm brought her from her reveries.

"The horses wait, my lady."

Came a swift flashing of lights from the house they had left behind, a scurry of feet, the sound of voices, loud, shrill, insistent. The Mexican seized her arm fiercely and half dragged her from off the court to a clump of bushes where two horses stood, saddled and bridled. In a second she was in the saddle, the man beside her. The clatter of hoofs rang out upon the silence. Looking back she caught glimpses of dark figures silhouetted against the tropical vegetation in the patio. A spurt of fire leaped out at them like a living thing. The Mexican muttered a guttural oath and urged his horse to more speed. Lucille bent over her horse's head, bent low, for the whine of bullets was in the air about them.

Suddenly the Mexican grunted loudly. His hands shot high in the air, then the horse fairly ran from under him. Upon the ground he swayed a second then leaped against the shadow of a giant fingered cactus plant. Lucille sprang from her saddle and sought his side.

Red, warm blood gushed from the wound in his chest. But not more red it was than the rose his tightening fingers clasped unto his heart, a rose from which the dew drop of the day before had disappeared. His eyes were glazing when she stooped and brushed her lips across his forehead. A shadowy smile crossed his face as he opened his eyes once more, eyes that were soft and tender before they glazed.

"Go!" he muttered. "Go!" Then his voice took on the resonant tone of a scant day or less before. "It is the ripple of the Wishing Well, my lady. Go! Ride—to the one—your—heart—desires."

He stiffened suddenly and a spurt of tears came from her eyes. Louder grew the shouts, the voices. The air was alive with long, darting flames. Loubeque's hive was swarming.

She leaped into the saddle once more and dug her heels into the horse's sides. Through the night she rode with all the Devils of Hell behind her and all the fear of a thousand times as many demons in her heart, but with the ripple of the Wishing Well in her ears.

(Continued Next Week.)