

LUCILLE LOVE, The Girl of Mystery

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

By the "MASTER PEN"

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AIN'TLY sweet the tantalizing perfume lingered in the room, and the rustle of Lucille Love's skirts seemed still to sound against the walls of the tiny room which General Sumpter Love used as his private office; the echo of Lieutenant Gibson's pleading tones had not departed when the door leading to the servants' quarters moved.

A cautious fraction of an inch at a time, a sound so faint that nothing lived between it and silence succeeded the departure of the General's aide and the girl he loves, the girl he means to marry. As the butler's face framed itself on the threshold, the door was opened that led to the hall room, a burst of music vibrated there, then all was silence. The butler closed the door swiftly behind him and glided across the floor, stooping before the safe, his dexterous fingers manipulating the knobs with a careless certainty that spoke of the master cracksman, his face against the cold steel, his ears fairly peaked with the tenseness of his listening for the click of falling tumblers. His expression betrayed no anxiety. He knew his worth, knew the pregnancy of the safe in which his master placed so great confidence and to which he had consigned the papers and orders he had just received from Washington until the hall was over and he had time to study the instructions at his leisure.

The cracksman heaved a sigh of relief as his sensitive finger tips told him the last tumbler had fallen. The great iron door swung open to his tug. For a second he waited, listened to the scuffle of feet, the melody of the orchestra. Then his hand disappeared, exploring the contents of the safe.

He was swift; he was certain; he was sure. Not a paper was disarranged. His fingers fluttered like little, white birds, drifting among the General's papers with a certainty that bespoke great familiarity. With a sigh of relief he stared at the sealed packet he had just seen the army officer receive and place here. The butler thrust it in his pocket, drawing out a package of banknotes and putting it in the tiny vault where the papers had been. The door closed softly, the knobs whirling under the man's touch.

Again he waited, listening, listening. The vibrations of the dancers' feet continued for a second, the strains of music died. With the noiseless glide of a panther the butler slipped across the floor and closed the door behind him. Not one motion had been wasted. For months he had served in his menial capacity for this one opportunity. For months to come he would continue to serve in order that no suspicion might rest upon him. Quietly, as though nothing had happened, he stepped to the great kitchen where the little brown servants of the household were scurrying heedlessly about, frightened at even the momentary absence of their master when the elaborate collation for the guests was still to be served.

A word here, a hint there and the Filipinos were on their way to the General's dining room with their burdens. All capability, all deftness, without wasting a word, a move, the butler brought his underlings back to the state of perfection into which he had trained them. As unconscious of the stolen envelope in his breast pocket as though such a thing as a burglarized safe had never been, Thompson alias Tommy the Dude, alias "Chi" Tom and wanted for just such jobs in many police departments of the world went about his work, only heaving a huge sigh of relief when General Love nodded curtly in token that the room where the buffet had been served might be cleared.

Ten minutes later the furtive expression came back to his face, the stealthy crouch to his frame. Noiselessly he glided out the rear of the house, scurrying across the moon-splashed parade ground and losing himself in devious windings among the officers' homes upon the military reservation. Manila slept noisily, the droning hum of the myriad insects rising and falling with the ever-recurring waves of heat that floated in from the ocean. Only the General's mansion glowed with light, a glistening structure transformed by the eerie witchery of night into a fairy palace of gold, the windows huge diamonds with each facet catching in its heart a score of moonbeams. Thompson nodded to himself as though very well satisfied, then slipped down a narrow side street, lined with disreputable houses that leaned at drunken angles toward one another, the filthy windows winking blearily to their neighbors. Before the largest of these places the butler paused a second. His hand reached toward the bell-pull. From some distant part of the house came back an echo. Slowly, very slowly the door swung open, swallowing up the figure of the thief-butler.

CHAPTER II.

The Finger of Suspicion.

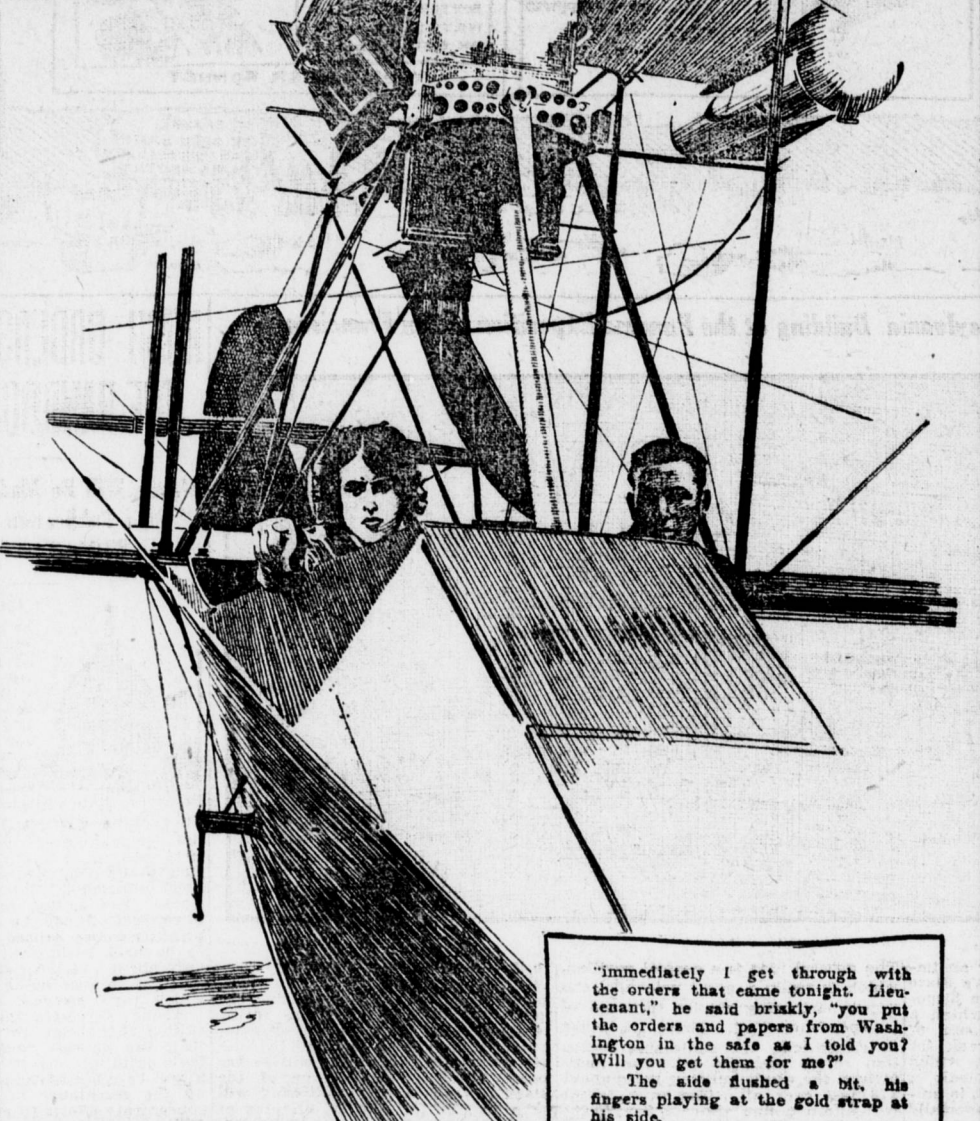
GENERAL SUMPTER LOVE, U. S. A., smiled tolerantly to himself as he overheard the low voices of his aide and Lucille coming from the little cozy corner in which the young lieutenant had hidden his sweetheart away from the avid dancers who would have taken her away from him. The old man closed his eyes a moment, the harsh lines which absolute dictatorship and war had sculpted upon his face disappearing before the softened expression retrospection placed there, an expression summoned up by memories of the days at the Point before ever a thought of oak leaves upon his shoulders dared intrude itself within his cadet mind, before Lucille was born, before Lucille's mother had made her choice.

The General shook his bulky shoulders and rose, moving toward his private office. It was seldom such memories came to him and when they left the pain of realizing them to be nothing more than memories provided pitiful compensation. He sighed heavily as he realized he stood on the threshold of another change, that the courtship of his aide had finally been successful and another household would soon be occupied in Officers' Row, leaving him alone in this great house.

He wondered if all fathers felt this way, wondering if he could gladly give his daughter to another man and be happy watching that other remould her world. And the time was so short. That very boat in the harbor now might bear the Senate's confirmation of young Gibson's promotion to the rank and pay of Captain. The two men had agreed that the marriage should wait on that and the General had to admit that the aide had lived up to his word. But then Gibson always did that.

Again the General shook his shoulders striding briskly to his private office. Only in work could he get relief from these fits of depression. And there was always work to be done, for the little brown people loved their fighting, were never satisfied with peace and quiet. For a second he stood at the window, staring at the great boat in the harbor, at the dappled waters, restful now save for the faintest movement when the soft tropical breeze moved caressingly across it. And that boat might bring word of his aide's promotion. He turned and pressed the annunciator on his desk, commanding the soldier

LUCILLE SEEKS TO OVERTAKE THE SHIP EMPRESS



THE AIDE IS JEALOUS OF THE AVIATOR

who responded to send Lieutenant Gibson to him.

General Love permitted a smile to play about the corners of his stern mouth as the rustle of a woman's skirt reached his ears simultaneously with the click of his aide's boots. Came a brief, whispered conversation outside the door, then the aide stood upon the threshold at attention, Lucille hiding behind him in an attitude of mock timidity. The old man bit his mustache viciously, then smiled broadly.

"Well?" he demanded, fumbling among the papers that littered his desk. "What have you got to say for yourself, young woman?"

Lucille slipped across the floor, twining a pair of white arms about her father's neck, the soft velvet of her cheek smoothing his brown, leathery one. It was the way she had coaxed him when a child, the way she had never outgrown or known to fail.

"It's about Dick's promotion, Dad," she whispered. "It hasn't come on the Empress and that means wait at least another month. If there was any chance of the Senate's failing to confirm it, we wouldn't bother you, but a month is such a long time and—Dick has some money now—"

"Yes—yes—yes," the General retorted gruffly, a twinkle in his eye that belied the tone. "But from what I've seen tonight and the last week since Harley started his aeromane maneuvers, I thought there might be some change in your plans."

Lucille flushed prettily, her eyes flashing a mocking smile at the stalwart young officer in the doorway.

"Mr. Harley's a very nice man," she defended. "even if Dick does get jealous. Besides a girl has to be amused somehow when busy old generals keep their officers working all day and night."

The General straightened in his chair, brought back to the work he had planned for the evening by her words. Lucille sighed as she caught the difference, knew there would be no use teasing longer when his mind turned to the arduous duties which never ceased to pile upon him.

"You think it over, dear," he said kindly.

"Immediately I get through with the orders that came tonight, Lieutenant," he said briskly, "you put the orders and papers from Washington in the safe as I told you? Will you get them for me?"

The aide flushed a bit, his fingers playing at the gold strap at his side.

"Why—why, General," he stammered, "I left the combination memorandum in my room. Lucille was waiting and—"

"Get it," snapped the old man. The slightest infraction of military system touched his heart on the raw.

He studied his aide curiously when he returned, with an expression of relief, "you have already been here, sir?"

"No," General Love's tone was peremptory, crackling. He did not relish delay of any sort. "Come, come! The papers I gave you, Lieutenant."

The aide fumbled through the papers in the safe, the expression of confidence on his face changing to one of blank incredulity, then utter dismay as a second thorough ransacking failed to reveal the big envelope. He drew a long breath as he straightened to attention, his face very white and drawn, his voice no more than a whisper.

"General, they are not there," he cried, then, with an expression of relief, "you have already been here, sir?"

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LOUBEQUE, THE INTERNATIONAL SPY FOLLOWED BY LUCILLE



"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST"

man's hand, and from salute as he stepped swiftly toward his sweetheart. General Love's arm reached out and drew the sobbing girl to him, his left hand outstretched as though the mere touch of his aide would be defiling. Gibson halted in his tracks. Again his arm rose stiffly in salute then, without a word, he turned, his steps falling fainter upon the ears of the pair who listened with leaden hearts.

CHAPTER III.

A Man With But One Thought.

HUGO LOUBEQUE turned the packet of papers and orders over and over in his hand, a brooding expression in his eyes that told his thoughts were very far away from the butler-cracksman who had just brought them to him. A massive figure of a man, he seemed to fill the room with his presence, the chair in which he sat seemed to have been built about him, the room itself with its magnificent furnishings dwarfed by its occupant. Greatest of international spies, the rise and fall of many nations might have been placed at his door, rivers of blood had burst their barriers at the touch of those powerful fingers. As the musician plays from the organ loft upon the sweet-toned chords in the church steeple far above, so did Hugo Loubeque play upon human emotions, bying, selling, defying, commanding nations to do his will through his superhuman insight into the dominating characteristics which mastered the rulers of those nations. A thousand wires there were throughout the world that responded to the master touch of this dark musician whose instrument was humanity, a thousand wires and yet again a thousand, and all—were directed toward reeve against one man, toward the destruction of General Love. What hideous memories that name of Love evoked! It sent his thoughts back to the horrible event of his life, to the military college, the scene of his disgrace where he had been exposed to the scorn of his fellow classmates. The proofs of his dishonorable plotting and treason work, had been furnished by Cadet Sumpter Love, his successful rival for the love of a beautiful girl. The conclusive and incontrovertible proofs of his guilt had resulted in his dismissal from the service and dishonour as a citizen of his native country.

Bitter and still more malignant grew this feeling of hatred against this fellow cadet of his early manhood days, this man now General Sumpter Love, as his mind went back to the days of a never to be forgotten past, the days of his downfall and disgrace.

Over and over he turned the stolen papers. Only another link it was in the chain he was drawing about the old army officer. Many more there would be before his work was finished and, already, his brooding eyes were sighted along the future—planning—planning—plotting. The butler coughed nervously and his master looked up, waving him away without a word of praise. The man had but done his duty. Hugo Loubeque expected that. The telephone rang and the spy stiffened in his chair, no more the dreamer. Loubeque was at work, finishing this detail in his scheme of revenge.

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CHAPTER IV.

"For the Honor of a Man."

IN a world of mental and physical inequalities such as this there would be but scant chance for the weakling were it not for a kind Destiny taking the cards in his own hands and stacking them to make the game more equal. With the ruin of every hope smashing about her, without a thought save the need for a confidant and friend in time of distress, she took up the telephone to speak with her chum, the wife of a young officer who had only just reached the post a month before.

On such slight things do hinge great consequences; on such trifles may be decided the wrecking of the most cunning plot of the master mind that dominates nations. For a second, sensitized by suffering though her mind was, she did not catch the significance of the orders being given by the man whose wife had crossed her own. Then a feeling of faintness caused her to reel at the power and strength she caught in the tones. She listened, conquering her fear in one triumphant throb of love for the imprisoned officer. Barley snatches could she get!

"General Love's orders and papers are in my possession now. For Shanghai on the Empress tonight. Have the launch ready."

And then the buzzing of the instrument told her that she could hear no more. It seemed too cruel, too impossible that her hopes should be raised so high only to be shattered. The General's orders and papers—The Empress for Shanghai immediately. She rushed to the window, her heart sinking at sight of the smoke curls spewing from the big liner's funnels. The Empress was ready—ready—and her sweetheart was arrested. Resolution so vague as to be indefinable urged her across the floor and out the door. She did not stop to analyze the impulse which urged

her feet across the parade ground, down the streets of Manila toward the dock. Her bosom was rising and falling tempestuously with the effort and a mad despair possessed her as she caught the signs of readiness from the Empress and saw there was no boat to take her out to the ship which carried the precious orders.

She beat her tiny fists fiercely together. There must be a way. There must be. Faintly to her ears came a humming sound from the boat. It reminded her of another sound she had heard of her problem—Harley and his aeroplane.

It was five miles, but her horse could do the distance in short time. Faster even than she had reached the dock did she get to the stables. In amazement the groom looked at her as he followed her orders. She leaped into the saddle and through the moonlight she dashed, the little mare accepting this new freak of his mistress with delight.

The aviator had only just returned from the dance when she flung herself from the mare and grasped him fiercely by the shoulders, shaking him in the vehemence of her command. He stared at her unbelievably as he made out what she desired, but there was something in the entreaty eyes, the drawn face, that told her deadly earnestness. His lips opened for a protest when she commanded herself and, placing her hands upon his shoulders, looked deep in the man's eyes.

"It means the honor of the man I love," Harley turned away, turned toward the giant plane.

Lucille was pleading for the honor of the man she loved—pleading as only a woman can plead. There at the water's edge a soul stirring tragedy was enacted. The aviator—a man among men, was being asked by the girl he loved to risk her life, and his own, to save the name of his strongest rival. Torn between conflicting emotions, he stared at her, half unbelievably, as with appalling intensity she pointed wildly out across the bright blue water to where the majestic liner was steaming rapidly towards the horizon. Lucille hung breathlessly on the aviator's every action. His lips opened for protest, but there was something in the entreaty eyes he could not resist. Breathlessly she watched him, awaiting his decision. There was a curiously twisted smile upon his lips when he faced her again.

"Get in," he motioned. She had won her appeal. Hugo Loubeque leaned against the liner's rail, pencil poised over the open page of the diary which was headed—Loubeque's Account with Love. Items upon that page had been cancelled, more remained clear. The hand started to draw through one of these last when, faintly to his ears, reached down a drumming sound from the heavens.

As his eyes wandered over the great bird in mid heaven grew more and more distinct, the figures of a man and woman emerging. A grim smile crowned the spy's face as he put the diary and pencil back in his pocket. For Hugo Loubeque was thorough, and the item might not be cancelled yet.

(Continued Next Sunday.)