

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 THE FOREGOING CHAPTERS.

While students together at West Point, and in love with the same girl, Sumpter proves Hugo Loubeque a thief, and Loubeque is dishonorably discharged. Lucille, the girl, the enemy thus begun finds out in later years at Manila, when a butler thief in the employ of Loubeque, now an international spy, steals valuable papers from the Government safe of General Love. Loubeque sails with them on the steamship Empress and General Love accuses Lieut. Gibson, his aide and the sweetheart of his daughter Lucille, of the crime. 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 out 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 them. 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 savages. She is given an amulet for curing the Chief, and she is made potent against the machination of Hugo Loubeque, who likewise 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 a neighboring Chief, whose wife is ill and in need of nursing. On the way there she falls into a covered pit, dug by Loubeque across her path.

CHAPTER XVII.

From the Tree Top.



LUCILLE stirred, opened her eyes in bewilderment, unable to piece together any connection between the black hole in which she found herself and the narrow trail through the jungle along which she had urged her horse. A solid wall of darkness enveloped her, darkness so intense as to make her believe at first she had lost her sight. She closed her eyes purposefully, opening them abruptly, fighting for light, agitated with the terror of being lost in this strange wild country without power of sight. She dared not reach out for fear of having her conjecture confirmed.

She lay still and silent, fighting against herself, slowly working up courage even as she reconstructed events preceding her waking to find herself in this predicament. Gradually it all came back to her, the squawking of her horse as the ground grew soft beneath his hoofs and with his rider, he plunged down into this black hole. Swiftly, with the recollection etching itself in every detail upon her mind in one picture of phosphorescent light, her hands sought her bosom and, with a little groan of utter misery, she gave way to uncontrollable sobs.

The reaction did her good, worked wonders with her. In that spell of self-pity, father, home, sweetheart, everything was forgotten before the horror of her own predicament. Finished with it, she gathered every faculty, mental and physical, and scrambled to her feet. Above her, as she lifted her eyes, she made out a streak of light, piercing between aisles of dense leafiness—the sun threaded home into the jungle. She moved forward, her hands before her, groping. Something soft and motionless and so still it caused her to shudder met the toe of her boot. She drew back in swift alarm, knowing it to be the body of the horse she had ridden, a great feeling of gratefulness at her own escape from a similar fate warming her through and through.

Mastering the innate repulsion within her she stepped upon the corpse, her hands reaching up and finding the smooth edge of the hole that had been dug across the pathway to entrap her. Her fingers found the roots of a tree, roots so stout they bore her weight. For a moment she waited, gathering her falling strength for the supreme effort. Then she sprang up, gathering her knees under her, relaxing slightly before putting forward every ounce of her strength and drawing herself slowly, deadly slow, toward the warm surface of the road.

For just a moment she lay there, half upon the road, her toes dangling over the pit, feeling the nothingness there. Then she scrambled to safety, panting and disheveled, and looked about her.

About her, on every side, the jungle breathed, loathsome, fetid, horrible. Like some giant monster it seemed to spread its myriad tentacles in every direction, barring egress, fastening upon the one who chanced to stray within it, sucking at one's very vitals. Riotous vegetation about, trees fighting their heads to the air and dwarfing weaker ones who, instead of succumbing, twined but the closer to the conqueror and shot out creepers that fastened about the trunks and, reaching the lower branches sent down showers of vines that made passage impregnable. Various colored orchids peered from their wickedly winking human-faced petals from out the branches of these trees, shaking their truncated bodies in diabolical glee at the girl's predicament. Chattering monkeys and brilliantly plumaged birds with horrid, squeaking voices made mock of her, scampering about aloft, always out of a possible danger zone from this strange being beneath them, yet never ceasing to mock and jeer.

But no odds how bleak the prospect, how forlorn the hope, one always feels courage renewed when one has just glimpsed a greater danger and averted it. Lucille had known within the quarter hour the horror of blindness and her heart leaped high with joy at being able to see these things. In this same jungle, too, her quite as bad a predicament was Hugo Loubeque and with Hugo Loubeque were the papers she had fought so hard to recover. She laughed aloud, her voice trilling a note so foreign to this black abode that even the animal life was silenced in amazement. She had conquered the air, fire, the wireless lightning, the waves, savages, the jungle to take away these stolen documents from a man whose identity, at first, she had not even known. And all these things had seemed to kneel before her, intent upon doing her bidding. And should she now, should she hesitate for one instant, should she doubt but that an outraged Providence would continue to aid her in this the greatest hour of need?

The thought braced her as would a douse of cold water. To right, to left, before her and behind was naught but jungle. Which way should she turn to come across the international spy? She felt the amulet about her neck with nervous, plucking fingers, as though seeking to read the answer there. Safety lay behind, back along the trail in the village of the chief who had so reluctantly permitted her to answer the trumped-up message from his neighbor. But she did not wish safety. She wanted the papers and civilization. Before her a thread of trail debouched that must lead somewhere, but Hugo Loubeque

was not the sort to trust a trail along which she might follow. To right and left was the mystery of the jungle. In that jungle was the man of power, the indomitable spy. In which direction she must leave to the power that had guided her steps so far, but she knew she must make quick choice.

As though her question was to be answered for her, she noticed the chatter of the monkeys suddenly changing, observed a wild alarm in their voices and, looking up, saw a host, an army of them huddled close together, then slipping swiftly, in wild disorder, from tree to tree. For some reason, perhaps the note so closely kin to terror of human beings in their every action, Lucille felt a thrill of something more than unbusiness coming upon her as she stared into the blackness to make out the reason for their alarm. Swiftly she shrank back before the blazing balls of fire that were fastened upon her from the heavy wall of vines and creepers.

She seemed to swim in those great, blazing eyes, those eyes that did not move from hers but sent forth flames as though they were fed from some unquenchable fire. A crackling of twigs and the beast disappeared. But the rustle overhead, the wild screeches of the monkey tribe, did not diminish in volume. It struck Lucille as incongruous that from the hatred she had felt a moment before for the gibbering little creatures with their aged faces, she should now be experiencing a friendliness, almost a sense of comradeship in this mutual danger.

Again that crackling of twigs, this time in greater volume, and where before but one pair of wild eyes had stared at her, there were now many eyes. She recollected the fires her savage friends had built of night, that the jungle beasts might not disturb them. But she had no means of lighting a fire. She was alone, with nothing to assist her save her own ingenuity. She retreated slowly, fear hanging upon her feet, holding her back even as low growls indicated that her retreat was observed and would probably be taken for a sign of fear.

At the sound the trees were shaken violently by another rush of the little tree-men. It gave her an idea instantly. Even as the eyes grew menacingly into long, graceful bodies, Lucille reached up and grasped the thick walls of creepers dangling from a giant-trunked tree. Came a rush, so silent and sure-footed she could hear but the faint pat-pat of the leopard's feet, followed by a heavy click of jaws. Instinctively she drew her feet up under her and fear leading impetus to her movements, clambered swiftly up the vines until the welcome crotch of the tree supported her.

Below her gathered the leopards, their sleek bodies twining restlessly round and round the tree where their quarry was, now and then leaping high in the air, their bodies convoluting as they swung toward her, trying fruitlessly to find some method of reaching that tree-crotch.

Their undiminished ferocity sent a chill through her. Higher and higher she climbed, climbed until the terrifying sight was shown from her eyes by the heavy foliage beneath, climbed until her muscles ached, climbed until even the crunching of twigs beneath failed to reach up to her.

Beneath her swayed the jungle. Above her flickered a myriad of stars. Like peep-holes in some great theater-curtain they were through which the master-player might watch what was going on in his world. They thrilled Lucille with their familiarity. So long she had been here in this jungle she seemed to have forgotten the existence of stars, regarded them as old friends. These same stars that looked down upon her now, were looking down upon Manila, upon her father, upon her sweetheart. These same stars were candles of Truth that would not, could not unblushingly look upon such a disaster as threatened her being consummated.

The reflection loaned her a courage from without herself. She felt a great weight lifted from her eyeballs at being once more in a natural light. She strained her sight in every direction, reveling in this glimpse of a world she knew so well, rejoicing at the realization that even the vast jungle with its menacing breath was but a shallow thing that reached but a little way and only superficially closed out the heavens, the same heavens that looked down upon her home.

And then her eyes were halted, stayed in their review by the sight of a long, thin spiral of smoke rising and reaching up toward the stars in wispy fragility. It came from miles to the westward. But Lucille knew that smoke for fire and the fire to be that lighted by human hands.

She lifted her eyes toward one glowing, long-wicked star that seemed so close she had but to reach up her finger tips to snuff its light. And the flame of the star seemed to bend toward her, incline gracefully toward her as though acknowledging the gratitude that glowed in her own star-like eyes and encouraging her and cheering her with its lustre.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Loubeque Fights Down a Strange Emotion.

LOUBEQUE could not have explained why, had he tried, but the thought that Lucille still possessed the mystic amulet given her by the chief for saving his daughter's life and which had served in such good stead against his machinations worried him more than a little. True, his plot had succeeded, the pit his servant dug across the trail had swallowed her up, and the old native crone had brought him the precious papers. But he was worried. This jungle was a menacing thing, a something which he could not command as it had been his custom to command things animate. Here, his position was but little stronger than that of the relentless girl. He felt himself, at times, almost wishing to be rid of the qualls which had forbidden his serving her with a death sentence.

She had the mystic amulet still and, always plotting in advance those things he wished done, it bothered him not to know exactly how great the power of that amulet was. He attempted to question his servant but the fellow always crouched away from him in terror at being questioned, evidently more frightened of being mentioned of the thing than he was of his master.

Together with the uncertainty of his position, with realization of the intense loneliness, his inability to speak the language of any people he might chance to meet, the international spy fought his way through the jungle in more of a spirit of terror than he ever experienced before. Nights, when he would build fires to fend off wild beasts that gathered in a circle about him and, when the flames from out the blackness, he would find her face emerging from the flames, her beautiful eyes—the eyes of her mother, the woman he had loved and whose memory he still loved—would stare at him in pitiful pleading, wells of purity and truth and love that seemed overshadowed with pity from a man who could feel hatred in such a beautiful world. And the sweet lips would tremble, the dainty nostrils quiver pleadingly, begging him for the right to clear the name of the man she

loved from dishonor.

And, in the midst of the fight within himself, Hugo Loubeque would cry aloud at the birth pains of affection for the girl struggling against the demons of hate and revenge which had so long dominated his very soul. And, often, in the self-inflicted agony of fighting to continue his live-long efforts toward annihilating General Sumpter Love, her father, he would roughly order his servant to rise and take up the dreary march once more.

Forcing his marches in mad desire to weary his body so, at night, his brain would succumb to the utter weariness that gripped him, Hugo Loubeque tried to fight away this change that made his march to take place within himself. He knew that it could not come, knew that the habit of a lifetime, such thought as he had concentrated on his revenge could not be beaten down by anything, and still there was something within him which taunted him with his inability to put the girl out of the way where she would no longer be a hindrance in the working out of his plans.

He noticed a growing sullenness on the part of his servant, a sulky obedience which came only grudgingly after rage had tipped his master's tones with menacing decisiveness. He decided to watch the fellow more carefully, though at the same time laughing at himself for the nervousness which was growing upon him. It was as though he could sometimes feel a shadow, quite different from the dark shadow of the jungle, between his shoulder blades, where he could not reach nor see nor identify it but which he knew for the shadow of impending calamity. And what calamity was there, what calamity had there been in all his eventful life to compare to the shadow of the frail girl-woman who shared with him this jungle? Enemies, each sworn to overcome the other no odds at what cost, they occupied this great, damp, beast-ridden jungle—within its boundaries when it came to the accomplishment of a mutual purpose—the holding or securing of the papers that to one meant revenge, the other love.

It was late in the fourth night that he finally saw to the fire his servant had prepared and stretched out, sinking almost instantly into profound slumber. He had fought against heavy sleep for the actions of the native had been unusually furtive and restless all day. There had been times when he would stop, retrace their path always as though studying their trail. How long he had slept he had no means of knowing. The awakening was of the most abrupt.

He started bolt upright, looking instinctively toward the place where his servant should have been. But the man had gone and the fire was scattering wildly about, as though someone had intentionally disturbed it that the jungle beasts might lose their fear of this man and pounce upon him. He heard the crackling of twigs under feet too swift to be other than those of man in terror, caught a glimpse of a wavering, flashing flare of torch-light, heard the piercing wail of a man's voice.

Grasping his revolver, Loubeque sprang to his feet, instantly wide-awake. For just a second he waited there, then drew a steady aim upon the leaping torch. The gun spoke, followed almost instantly by the shrill voice of Lucille.

"Don't shoot! It's a lion—"

Loubeque allowed the revolver to drop to his side. Suddenly the wonder of her being at his camp site struck him and simultaneously his hand sought the sack about his neck. It was gone, disappeared.

Even as he darted forward, fighting madly against the black tangle of vegetation that barred his way, he was withheld by some feeling within from firing the revolver at that torch. He could hear the low growls of a wild animal, caught a stray glimpse of Lucille standing over a dark, shapeless figure of a man beside the bank of a little stream, while, before the waving torch she had snatched from the camp-fire of her enemy, a great lion was silently retreating.

Loubeque caught a glimpse of this, then in his efforts to reach her side, he was shut from sight completely. He tried to stumble back to her when the ground seemed to kick up its heels and slide backwards. He clutched vainly for support, his hands encountering the arm of a man. Cold water closed upon him and, still clutching the arm, he allowed himself to float down the stream for a ways. Then, in a turn, he managed to secure footing and drag the body of his dead servant, horribly mutilated by the claws of the lion, to shore. But search though he would, the little bag that contained the papers was not to be found.



For Three Days Lucille Kept Very Near the Camp Fire Light.

CHAPTER XIX.

With the Earth Bound Creatures.

FOR three days Lucille kept very near that camp fire light, furtive as any of the animals that prowled about, guarding herself against them by the same fire that protected her enemy. Times, only the watchfulness of Loubeque, his cat-like slumber, prevented her carrying out her audacious plot to steal the little bag in which he still carried the papers.

It was the night of the fourth day that she decided to take a desperate chance, the same night that creeping close upon the camp she saw something about the actions of the native that made her keep very still, her eyes following his every movement with the alertness of one of the animals that prowled without that zone of light from the fire. She caught her breath with a little gasp as she saw the man creep noiselessly toward his master and purloin from about his neck the precious bag which carried the papers she had come so far to rescue.

As he crept away from his victim, Lucille slowly rested her feet, her whole soul quivering with delight. For there would be no difficulty with this native compared to the coping of wits and resources with the powerful brain and body of Loubeque. Evidently the savage, seeing the zealous guard his master kept of the bag, had decided to steal it and run.

Lucille's trailing of the native was halted abruptly by a wild cry of alarm, followed by a loud screech of pain, the thud of bodies falling heavily, a horrid, ripping sound. Dimly, she glimpsed the shadowy outlines of a magnificent lion, head lifted as though he listened for someone, his paw reaching out and resting upon a shapeless, groaning mass she knew for the thief's servant. For a second she stood, staring at the spectacle, paralyzed by the horror, the swift retribution which had overtaken the native. Then, without a thought of consequence, with nothing save the primal urge of saving life, she leaped across the narrow space that separated her from the spy's campfire, kicking the embers right and left, grasping the hardest flamed knot of them all and darting toward the lion, waving the torch fearlessly.

The animal uttered a low growl, stood his ground for a moment before this menace that darted at him, then tucked his tail between his legs and slunk back into the jungle from which he had appeared so unexpectedly. Lucille bent over the wounded man, uttering a low cry of sympathy as she turned away in terror from the horribly wounded torso. Gradually it dawned upon her that the man was dead, quite dead. She could not realize it instantly, then the voice of Loubeque's revolver spoke and she uttered her warning cry.

The shot brought everything back to her. She was here, not to sympathize, even with one wounded to death, but to save her sweetheart's honor. She fumbled at the man's scant attire, drawing the sack triumphantly forth and looking back to where she could see Loubeque advancing.

For just a second she paused. Then some impulse governing her she thrust the burning knot of wood between the interstices of a nearby lattice work of vines and slunk stealthily to the right, knowing the spy would follow the light instead of herself. Even as she watched his movements, glorying in the success of her strategy, her hand pressed against something cold and damp. She looked swiftly down at the stone ruins beside her, along which she had been walking, ruins so covered with the thick tropical vegetation that she might have moved two feet to the left and passed them by in complete ignorance of their existence. She passed her fingers over the stone she had first encountered, rubbing away the mud and creepers that covered it so completely.

There was one spot that appeared to have crumbled more than the rest of the wood and she scraped industriously at it, even as her attention was fastened upon the groping figure of Loubeque. Suddenly, without the slightest warning she saw the ground moving, moving restlessly as it would move had some monster mole been burrowing beneath its surface. It was moving, moving directly under Loubeque. She started back, wide-eyed at the spectacle of a great stone door suddenly springing wide and hurling the man who had stood upon it to one side, completely out of her sight. She advanced timidly, starting about for sign of the spy but he was not to be seen. She peered down the black hole that had opened, wondering, half inclined to believe herself in a trance. For a flight of stone steps reached up to her, reached up from the blackness, a blackness which her eyes could not pierce, try though they would.

A bit terrified, yet with curiosity irresistible, Lucille timidly put a foot upon the first step, then halted. She waited a moment then followed her right foot with the left. As though some giant hand urged her down, her reluctant feet moved slowly, step by step, down the long flight. And always would she stare, in nameless terror, lest the door be suddenly closed and her means of exit barred. And, even as she looked, her premonition of evil was verified.

Slowly, very slowly, the stray light that

opened down to her through the passage narrow, disappeared. To her ears came the sound of feet, swift, sure. About her such blackness as she had never even imagined before, a blackness which seemed to cling to her like a heavy muffer upon the eyes, a blackness so thick it mixed with the rank, tomb-like smell of the underground place wherein she stood.

Slowly she groped her way back to the steps, finding the last one and feeling about for some means of throwing back the opening. The steps beneath her feet were slippery, worn as though the feet of thousands and hundreds of thousands had passed that way for as many years. And always about her, yet never so close as to come in contact with her, were the owners of the feet that slipped and glided sure-footedly upon the steps. Above her, that solid wall of blackness, steps that led down into the bowels of the earth; about her, human beings whom she could not see. In the intensity of her nervousness, she flung herself upon the steps, giving way to racking sobs at the horrible fate that appeared to have put an end to her adventures.

No odds how weirdly situated, how dreadful one's predicament, encounter with human beings—initial or invisible though they be—is calculated to rouse one's combative spirit. Lucille rose swiftly, her brain in a whirl, her pulse numbed as curiously claw-like hands—but human hands—sought out her wrists, drawing her down the steps, silently, with undeviating purpose, but never harshly. Realizing the futility of resistance, her utter helplessness, Lucille numbly allowed herself to be conducted down the long flight. A veritable army seemed to swarm before and about her, judging from the footfalls. The hands upon her wrists were cold, unhealthy, hairy, yet the sounds of the voices of her captors were the harsh gutturals of deaf mutes, incomprehensible yet human.

Her knees jolted almost from under her as she reached out and finally found no downward step. Round devious, black passages, through rock-walled aisles, some so close the sides brushed against her, she was hustled. She had given herself completely up to her guides. She knew, with a heavy despair that only accident could enable her to find her way back to the steps through all the turns they had made. Quite abruptly she felt her eyes blinded, as the mantle of blackness was flung aside, her vision cleared. She could not see, then, becoming accustomed to the transition from darkness to comparative light, she looked with a shudder of terror, upon the hairy, dwarfed, misshapen creatures who surrounded her; creatures who chattered in the gutturals of mutes; creatures whom the perpetual darkness had paled to a fish-like pallor; creatures whose hydrocephalic heads were always bent far forward as though the sense of hearing had been given them in treble value because of the blindness with which the subterranean life had afflicted them, a blindness so complete as to make itself evident to her with even seeing the white, sightless pupils that bulged at her through the hairy mane upon their faces.

Sick with the unwholesomeness of the sight, Lucille lifted her eyes, at a shrill chattering note in the gutturals, a note that was strangely familiar, even welcome. Anything would have been welcome to her ears as against the repulsive noises made by the mutes. She stared wonderingly at the enormous carved statue of a malignant faced man, a man with mighty torso and gigantic arms, a man whose head towered far above her and whose forehead and neck and arms were loaded with blazing rubies. The alien sound that drove the mutes crouching back came from the gigantic statue. And then Lucille saw that a huge orang outang squatted complacently in the palms of the idol, his beady eyes blinking wonderingly at her, his wrinkled, old-man's face puckered curiously.

As though their fear had subsided, the underground creatures once more closed in upon Lucille. Some impulse made her dart toward the orang as though for protection. The four creatures were about her, clawing at her with their horrible, certain paws, like giant bats. The monkey seemed suddenly to waken to the situation. With a shrill note of rage he leaped from his squatting posture and snatched the necklace of rubies from about the idol's neck, flinging it squarely into the center of the mob. It had the effect of drawing them back for a moment. With shrill squeals, the orang's hairy paw plucked jewel after jewel from the idol, hurling them at the creatures with the speed of bullets. Again and again he drove them back from her and Lucille constantly fought her way closer to this strange protector.

Her heart sank as she saw the creature had no more missiles. She caught a flash of hairy arms and body as he leaped toward her, his huge, round arms flailing about him, dropping the subterranean inhabitants at every swing. Lucille, guided by some impulse, stooped and picked up the blazing necklace, extending it to the orang. He seemed not to notice. Wildly he threshed about, the creatures dropping like nine-pins. Backward, ever backward, Lucille felt her way, edging through the mob as her protector cleared a passage. The rock ribbed vault echoed and re-echoed hideously with the shrill squeals of rage from the orang, the gutturals of terror and pain from her assailants. Now they were fighting among themselves, tumbling about in a wild chaos of arms and legs and bodies.

She closed her eyes against the terrible sight. Despite herself she almost succumbed to a feeling of faintness from the nausea which the creatures' hideous sightlessness inspired within her. Suddenly Lucille felt her feet slipping from under her; felt herself going down toward a rippling, musical sound; gently falling through the blackness as though she sank within a soft mattress of feathers.

Cold waters rose up and broke her fall, closing about her and edging her gently to and fro. Instinctively she reached out, her hands closing about a narrow strip of wood. With every atom of strength in her frail body she clung, making out finally that the object was a canoe. Slowly she slipped down the current until a flicker of narrow light glowed far ahead.

The sight inspired her with fresh energy. She drew herself up, carefully balanced the canoe against her weight then slipped into the bottom and lay there, exhausted. She groped about as the sides of the subterranean cavern expanded, the light grew broader. A paddle encountered her fingers and she thrust it out into the water. Came a crunching of wood as it ripped against the rocky sides of the shallow ravine and she stared in dismay at the useless handle that alone remained to her.

Gently, lazily the canoe floated down, toward the ever-expanding wedge of light. Slowly, very slowly, the fresh air of the jungle met her quivering nostrils, sweet to her now in comparison with the unwholesome odor of the underground world from which she had so miraculously escaped. And even as she opened her mouth, laving her throat with the intoxicating odor that had been so repulsive to her before, the canoe was lifted up, snatched up and whirled about in a gigantic, swishing circle.

Lucille instinctively thrust the broken shaft of paddle into the water, finding it useless. She crouched low. Round and round in ever narrowing circles she was whirled, the black water white now as it lashed itself into raging circles from the exact center of which rose a jagged-toothed rock; a rock that imperturbably, cruelly waited this dainty morsel being brought him.

(Continued Next Week.)