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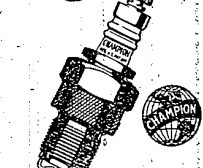
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# The MYSTERY ROAD

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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## PAULINE

**SYNOPSIS**—Fleeing from a brutal stepfather, an unhappy home, and a proposed husband she detests, Myrtle, young French girl, stands in a country road on the verge of desperation. Haunted by an exploded tire, two young Englishmen, Lord de Dombey and Christopher Bent, are attracted by the girl's distracted appearance. They beg her to take her away from her misery. In a spirit of adventure they go. Convinced that Monte Carlo and leaving her with friends, Myrtle speaks English, but mother having been an educated woman, Gerald sees a beautiful young woman in the gambling rooms, and is fascinated and is with her aunt. He is unable to secure an introduction. Christopher and Gerald decide Myrtle shall not go back to her home. Lady Mary, Gerald's sister, secretly in love with Christopher, disapproves of the young men's guardianship of Myrtle.

## CHAPTER IV—Continued

There was a somewhat hectic silence for several moments. Madame Lenore could scarcely conceal her contempt for the crudeness of this putative Englishman. Myrtle herself felt as though a dream of paradise were fading away. Gerald, however, was good fellow enough at heart, felt further insistence impossible. He was quite content to drift into danger; he was not so casual enough to evade a plain warning.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to let this disagreeable fellow have his way," he declared. "Take her along, madame, and see what you can do. You hear my friend's idea—plain blue serge buttoned up to the throat, culottes, stockings and square-toed shoes."

"There will be a compromise," madame declared firmly. "And for the rest, little and old trouble too much for whippersnappers like you. Myrtle away. I shall keep these clothes just as they are, until the other gentleman has made up his mind to meddle no longer. Come to me when you are ready, if you make up your mind that myrtle will take notice of no other woman."

Myrtle's eyes were swimming with tears.

"It was just for him that I wanted to keep these clothes," she said. "I wanted him to take me out and to feel that I looked like other girls. As for Monsieur Christopher, I detest him!"

In the shower outside, madame of the two young men was particularly disposed for conversation. Christopher felt a distinct return of his first apprehension concerning Gerald's attitude towards Myrtle, while Gerald himself was conscious of a vague sense of resentment at his friend's interference, of the more poignant, perhaps, because of its wisdom. Anything in the nature of an explanation between the two was rendered impossible by the smallness of the room and the presence of the shop assistants. So Gerald contented himself with fighting a cigarette, while Christopher studied a book of fashion.

Presently Myrtle came out to them once more. The transformation was still amazing, but the blue serge costume was absolutely plain except for a thick edging of gold and the little toque, with its dark blue veil, absolutely free from ornamentation. Yet it seemed almost incredible that this graceful girl who came towards them in a little shyly but with perfect self-possession should indeed be the peasant child who had been under their care for rather less than twenty-four hours.

"Madame Lenore is transformed," Myrtle declared. "She has natural elegance. In the simplest clothes I could give her, she would still create an impression. I have done my best, madame, I must. I trust that you are satisfied."

"I am going to take Myrtle to Ciro's to lunch. Come along, Christopher," said Gerald.

## Chapter V

lined face, but tall and of powerful build. He possessed to the full the immobility of feature of the trained English servant, but there was something entirely foreign in his smiling like attitude and expression. He had the air of one who neither saw nor heard save at his mistress' orders.

"I am weary of everything here except the what," Pauline declared deliberately.

The woman opposite knocked the ash from her cigarette. Here was an aged and blithered face, but her black eyes were still full of life and fire. Her long, thin hand, on which flashed several strangely set rings, was suddenly extended toward the waiting servant. Without a word he bowed and disappeared.

"One must wait," Madame de Fontaine declared.

"For what?" the girl asked lazily.

"The other woman's eyes glittered for a moment."

"For what will surely come," she declared. "The portents are all there. The writing is no longer upon the wall—it blazes to the sky."

"And meanwhile," Pauline murmured, "the sun shines, my heart beats in time to it, and I feel all the time the weariness of the day."

"It is the insurrection of youth," the older woman conceded indulgently. "I suppose the greatest must feel it some day."

She thrust another cigarette into her tube and lit it, inhaling with the long, regular breaths of the confirmed smoker. Her delicately-shaped but tawny-like fingers were stained with nicotine.

"Zubin arrives this week," she announced.

Pauline yawned.

"More mysteries," she murmured, "more false hopes, more exaggerated."



"There Will Be a Compromise," Madame Declared Firmly.

stories. Nothing good will come of Zubin's visit but the money he brings, unless by any chance he has news of Stepan. Meanwhile, dear madame, I bore myself. I rather wish that I had been born an American."

The woman showed no sign of anger, yet somehow or other she seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of contempt.

"It is perhaps a pity," she admitted, "that you are descended from one of the greatest rulers the world has ever known. It is perhaps a pity."

"Give me something to rule over," the girl declared, "and I will be content—the souls and liberties of a few million people, or the hearts of a few men. I am twenty-three years old and the sun is within me. And then there is no money to gamble with. What is life of music, madame, to one who lives behind the bars? It simply makes one pull at them a little harder. I am so badly off as Stepan himself, who loves me from behind the fortresses walls. Sometimes I wish that I were there with him."

Madame de Fontaine reached for an ivory-tipped stick and rose to her feet. Almost as though by magic, from somewhere within the dim, cool recesses of the room beyond, the gray-haired manservant was by her side. She leaned upon his arm.

"We drive at four o'clock, Pauline," she said. "Afterwards, we will watch the play at the Sporting Club."

Pauline shrugged her shoulders. It was the same yesterday afternoon, and every day behind. It would probably be the same tomorrow. She looked intently across the narrow gorge toward that other villa. A two-wheeled car had just come from the road and was crawling up the winding avenue. She stretched out her hand for the field glasses which lay on the table by her side. The figure of the young man at the wheel was familiar to her.

Pauline rose to her feet. Almost as mysteriously as the manservant had appeared a few moments before, a black-coated maid hastened toward her. Pauline shook her head.

"This afternoon I do not wish to rest," she decided. "I shall walk in the garden."

Pauline descended the stone steps, crossed the drive and plunged into a narrow footpath which wound its way through a plantation of stunted but sweet-smelling pine trees, downward toward the sea. The path was not an easy one, and Pauline's shoes were scarcely designed for such an adventure. Nevertheless, she persevered. At last she gained her end. She stood upon the little strip of sand, bespangled with rocks, which bordered the sea. Only a few yards away the shimmering blue water rocked toward the land in little waves. She turned and looked back. The villa from which she had come seemed like a doll's house shining out of its sheltering clump of cypresses. More directly above her now was the far more extensive residence of Lord Elmsbury. She looked toward it anxiously. There were several people upon the broad veranda, amongst them the slim figure of a young man at its further edge, gazing intently in her direction. She smiled a little as she picked her steps across the yellow sand to the edge of the sea and clambered on to a rock. A queer fit of headiness was upon her as she stood upon the edge of the slippery rock, finding a strange pleasure in the salt-laden air and the wind which brought a thousand ripples of light to the trembling blue sea, which glistened with whitecaps and even brought disarrangement to her smoothly bound hair. This tempering of the sunshine brought a new joy to its warmth. She stood there basking in a purely sensory pleasure, forgetful for a moment of the depression of the morning. The sound of tumbling stones in the little gorge behind scarcely disturbed her. It was not until she heard footsteps upon the path of beach that she turned her head. Coming toward her, already only a few yards away, was a young man of personable appearance and undoubtedly determined expression. For once in his life Gerald had made up his mind.

Although he was in reality brimful of confidence in all his relations with the other sex, Gerald had sometimes a not altogether unattractive appearance of shyness. He stood bareheaded for a moment, looking up at Pauline.

"I am sorry if I startled you," he said. "I was looking for my sister. I suppose this is a favorite place of hers, and when I saw you standing there I rather jumped to the conclusion that you must be she."

"Really?" Pauline replied. "Are we so much alike, then?"

"Not in the least," he declared frankly.

"That seems to make your explanation a little insufficient, does it not?" Pauline remarked.

Gerald settled down to business.

"I know that I ought to have turned back," he said, "but after all, wasn't it much more natural of me to come up? I have been trying ever since I met you yesterday to get someone to introduce me—we are, after all, as I have just discovered, to my great delight, neighbors—and this is the Riviera, not Berkeley square. May I tell you that my name is Gerald Dombey, that my father and sister have the villa up there, and that, from the moment I saw you, I have been anxious to make your acquaintance?"

She looked at him in silence for a moment, half critically, half thoughtfully. There was nothing absolutely discouraging in her attitude, and yet Gerald somehow conceived the idea that this might not after all, be so easy an affair as he had hoped.

"Are you used to enlarging your acquaintance in this manner?" she asked.

"I very seldom feel the desire to do so," he assured her. "Don't be unduly nervous. I am really quite a respectable person. I will call upon your aunt, if she will give me permission."

For the first time Pauline smiled. It was neither a cold smile, but the fact that it was a smile at all was encouraging.

"I fancy that you had better dismiss that suggestion from your mind altogether," she said. "My aunt does not receive here, and she certainly would not welcome you as a caller."

"Why not?" Gerald inquired, a little perturbed.

"Because you are a young man," Pauline replied. "There are two things which my aunt deems more than anything else in life—a bad throat for herself, and young men for me."

"I don't know what she can hope to keep young men away from you altogether," Gerald declared. "You don't mind my saying, do you, that you are the sort of girl whom young men would want to know?"

He smiled returned. She even laughed slightly, showing some very wonderful teeth.

"Really, you are a most singular person," she observed. "Do all young Englishmen talk to casual acquaintances in this unrestrained fashion?"

Gerald was puzzled. Pauline was not altogether falling into line with the conclusions he had arrived at concerning her.

Pauline was evidently as attractive as she is mysterious. Will Gerald be able to break through her reserve?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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